魔法科高校の劣等生 2

The irregular at magic high school

入学編〈下〉

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Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

電撃文庫

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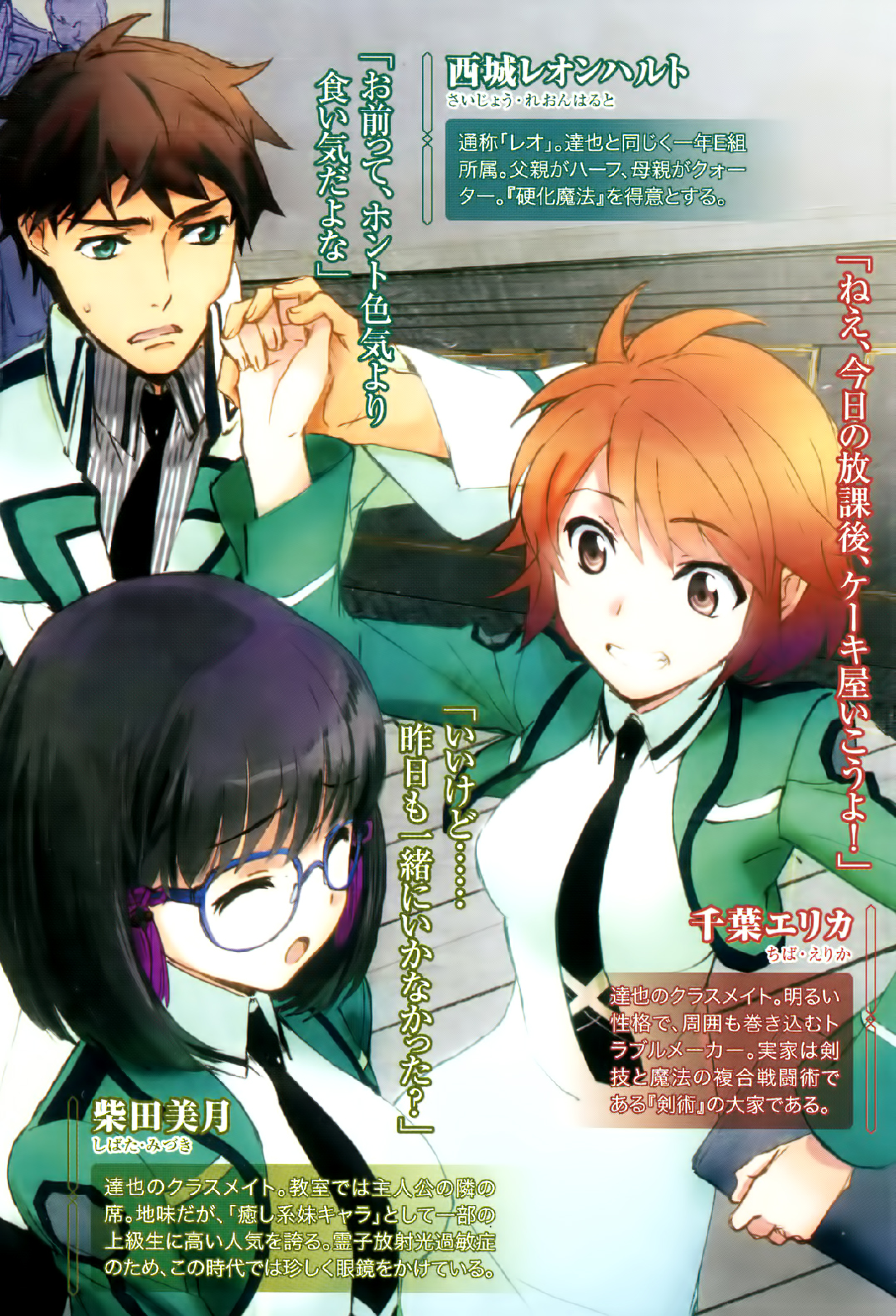
illustrator assistant／ジミー・ストーン、末永康子

design／BEE-PEE


「ねえ、今日の放課後、ケーキ屋いこうよ！」
「お前って、ホント色気より食い気だよな」
「いいけど……昨日も一緒にいかなかった？」

西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると

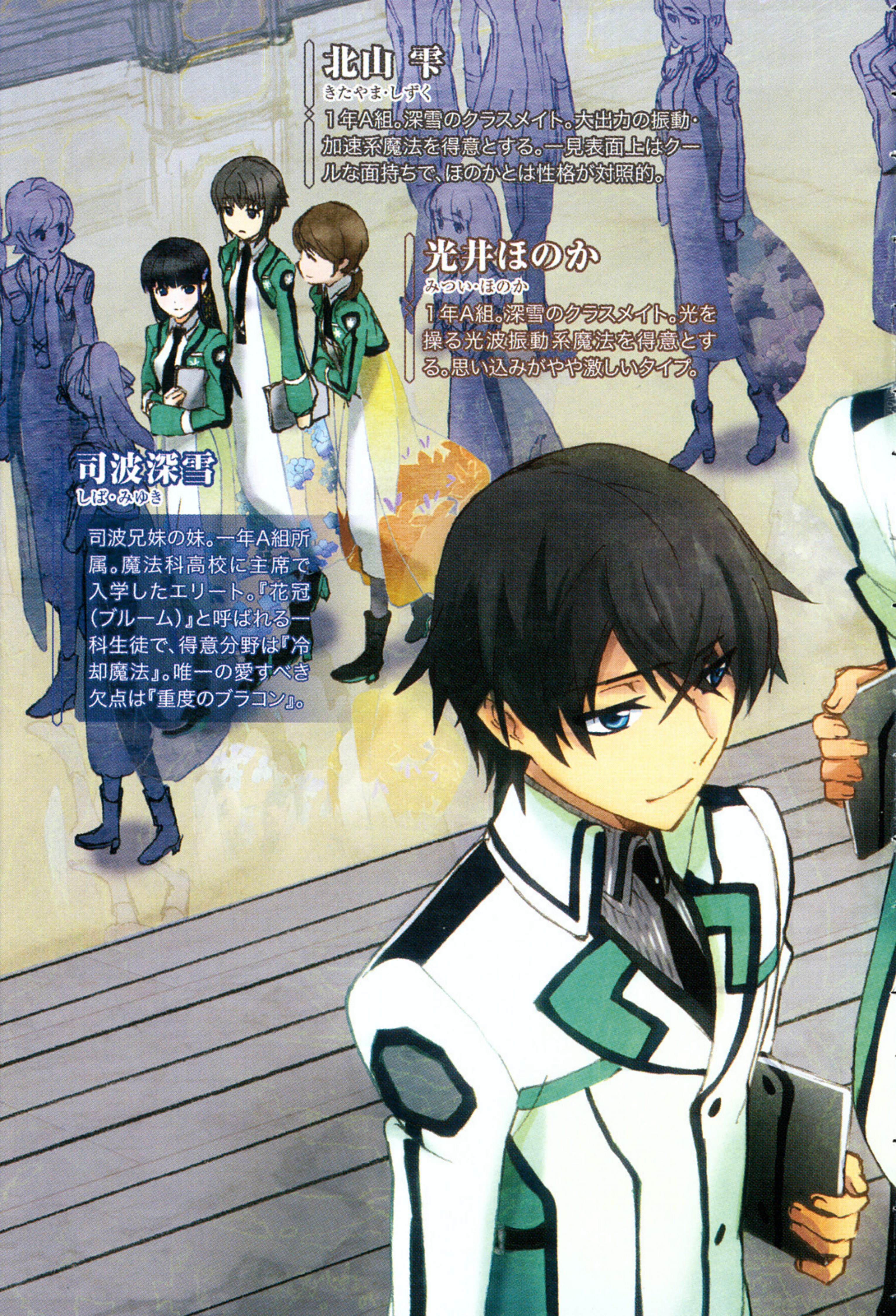
通称「レオ」。達也と同じく一年E組所属。父親がハーフ、母親がクォーター。『硬化魔法』を得意とする。

千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか

達也のクラスメイト。明るい性格で、周囲も巻き込むトラブルメーカー。実家は剣技と魔法の複合戦闘術である『剣術』の大家である。

柴田美月
しばた・みづき

達也のクラスメイト。教室では主人公の隣の席。地味だが、「癒し系妹キャラ」として一部の上級生に高い人気を誇る。霊子放射光過敏症のため、この時代では珍しく眼鏡をかけている。



北山 雫
きたやま・しずく

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。大出力の振動・加速系魔法を得意とする。一見表面上はクールな面持ちで、ほのかとは性格が対照的。

光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。光を操る光波振動系魔法を得意とする。思い込みがやや激しいタイプ。

司波深雪
しば・みゆき

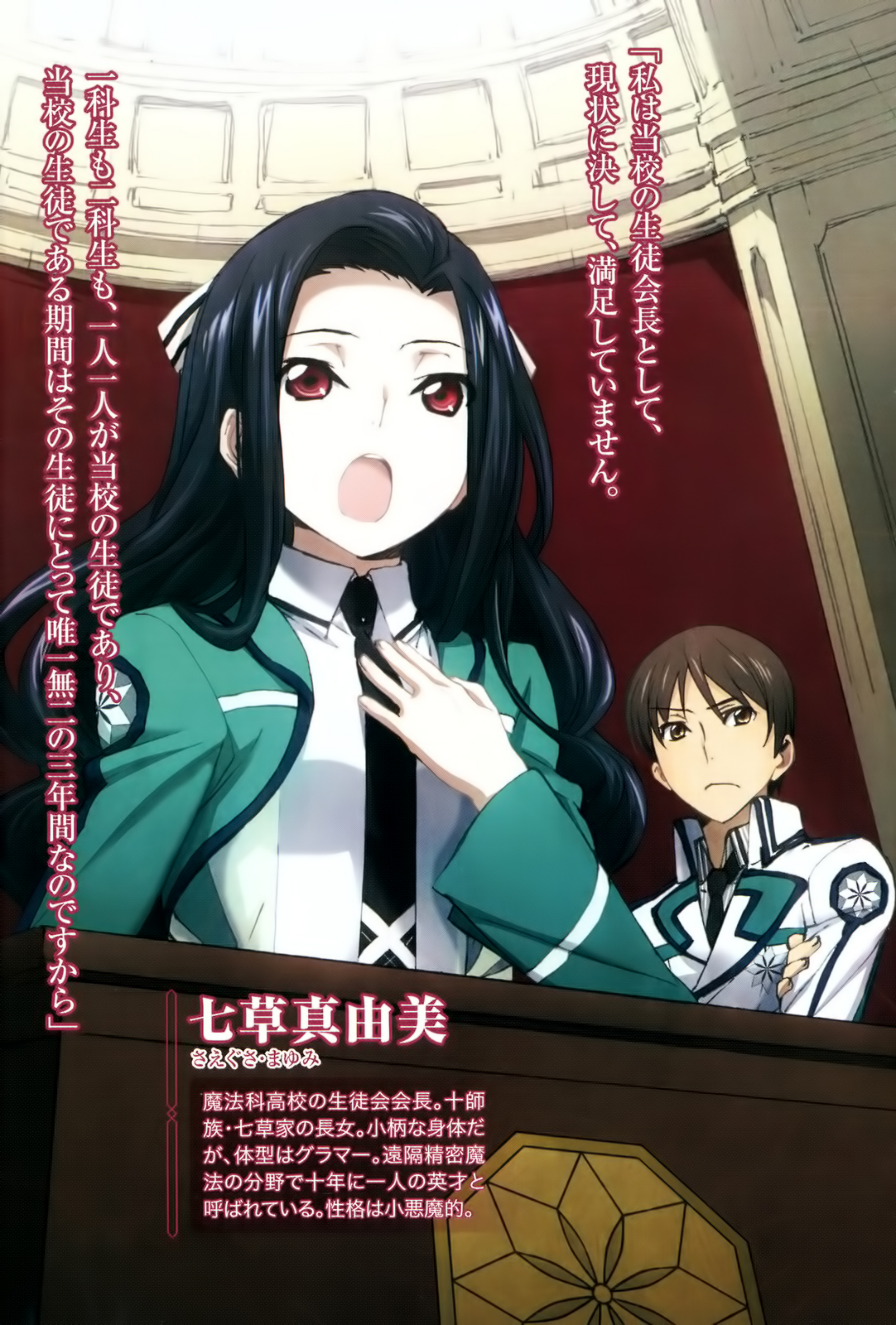
司波兄妹の妹。一年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。

「俺に風紀委員になれ、だと？
いきなり何なんだ、あれは」

司波達也

しば・たつや

司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校の新入生。一年E組所属。『雑草（ウィード）』と揶揄される二科生徒。得意分野は魔法術式補助演算機（CAD）の設計など技術系。

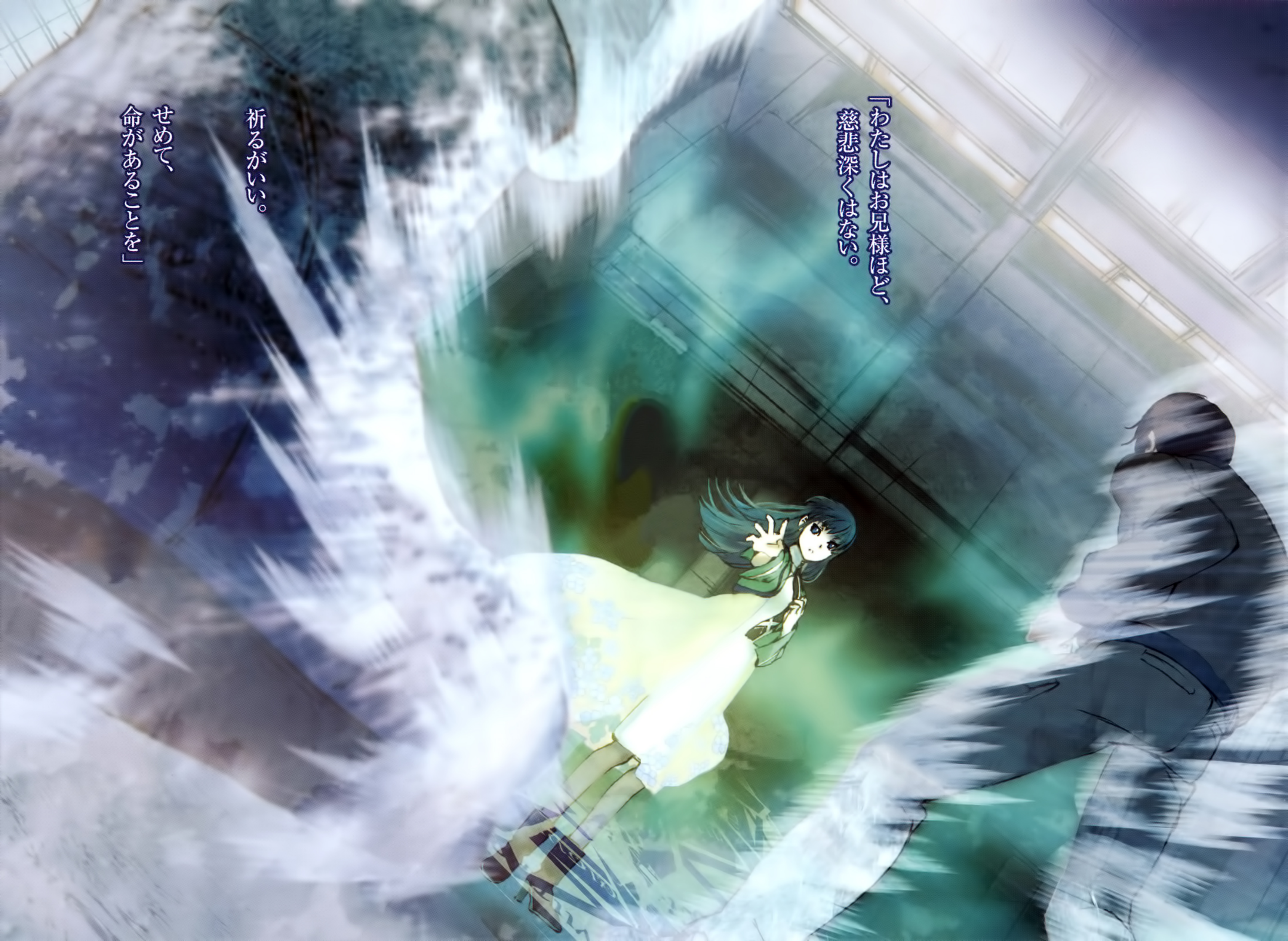


「私は当校の生徒会長として、現状に決して、満足していません。一科生も二科生も、一人一人が当校の生徒であり、当校の生徒である期間はその生徒にとって唯一無二の三年間なのですから」

七草真由美

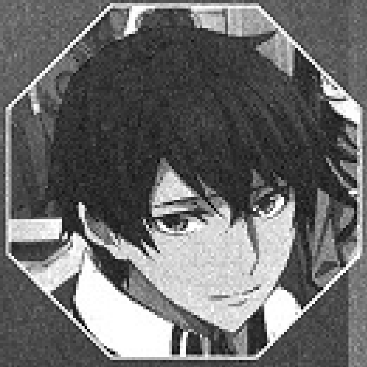
さえぐさ・まゆみ

魔法科高校の生徒会会長。十師族・七草家の長女。小柄な身体だが、体型はグラマー。遠隔精密魔法の分野で十年に一人の英才と呼ばれている。性格は小悪魔的。

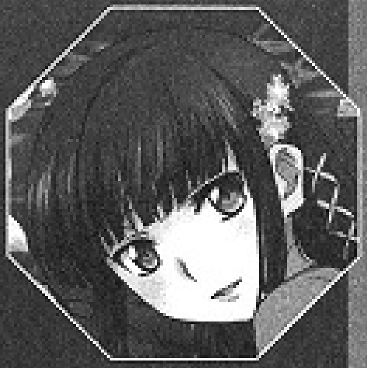


「わたしはお兄様ほど、
慈悲深くはない。
祈るがいい。
せめて、
命があることを」

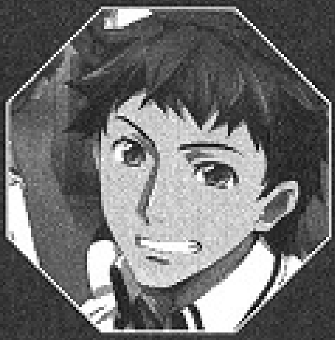
Character
キャラクター紹介



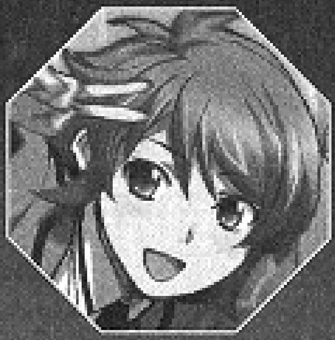
司波達也
しば・たつや
1年E組。『雑草』と揶揄
される二科生(劣等生)。



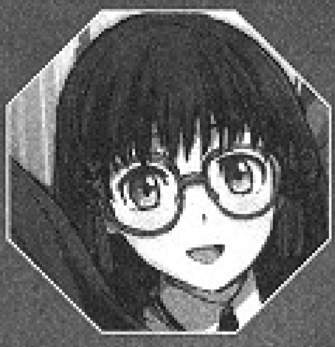
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
1年A組。
主席入学した達也の妹。



西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。



千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。



柴田美月
しばた・みづき
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。

◆ **光井ほのか**
みつい・ほのか
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。

◆ **北山 雫**
きたやま・しずく
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。

◆ **森崎 駿**
もりさき・しゅん
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。

◆ **七草真由美**
さえぐさ・まゆみ
三年生。生徒会会長。

◆ **服部刑部少丞範蔵**
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
二年生。生徒会副会長。

◆ **市原鈴音**
いちはら・すずね
三年生。生徒会会計。

◆ **中条あずさ**
なかじょう・あずさ
二年生。生徒会書記。

◆ **渡辺摩利**
わたなべ・まり
風紀委員会委員長。

◆ **辰巳鋼太郎**
たつみ・こうたろう
三年生。風紀委員。

◆ **沢木 碧**
さわき・みどり
二年生。風紀委員。

◆ **桐原武明**
きりはら・たけあき
二年生。剣術部所属。
関東剣術大会中等部のチャンピオン。

◆ **壬生紗耶香**
みぶ・さやか
二年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の全国二位。

◆ **司 甲**
つかさ・きのえ
三年生。剣道部所属。
男子部の主将を務める。

◆ **十文字克人**
じゅうもんじ・かつと
三年生。全クラブ活動の
統括組織である部活連の会頭。

◆ **小野 遥**
おの・はるか
1年E組の総合カウンセラー。

◆ **九重八雲**
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。達也の体術の師匠。

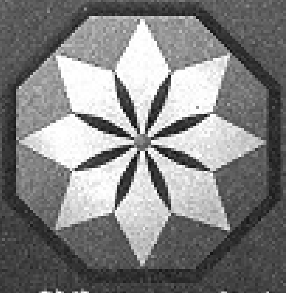
Glossary
用語解説

魔法科高校

国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で一科・二科制度を採っている。

ブルーム、ウィード

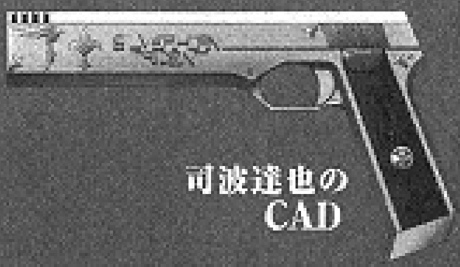
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが刺繍されているが、二科生の制服にはこれが無い。


一科生のエンブレム

CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕

魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。内部には魔法のプログラムが記録されている。特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。

司波深雪のCAD


司波達也のCAD

フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕

国内CADメーカーの一つ。元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、シルバー・モデルの開発により一躍CADメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

トーラス・シルバー

僅か一年の間に特化型CADのソフトウェアを十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

エイドス〔個別情報体〕

元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてエイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

イデア〔情報体次元〕

元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録されるプラットフォームのこと。魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに魔法式を出力して、そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

起動式

魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。CADには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

サイオン（想子）

心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式はサイオンで構築された情報体である。

プシオン（霊子）

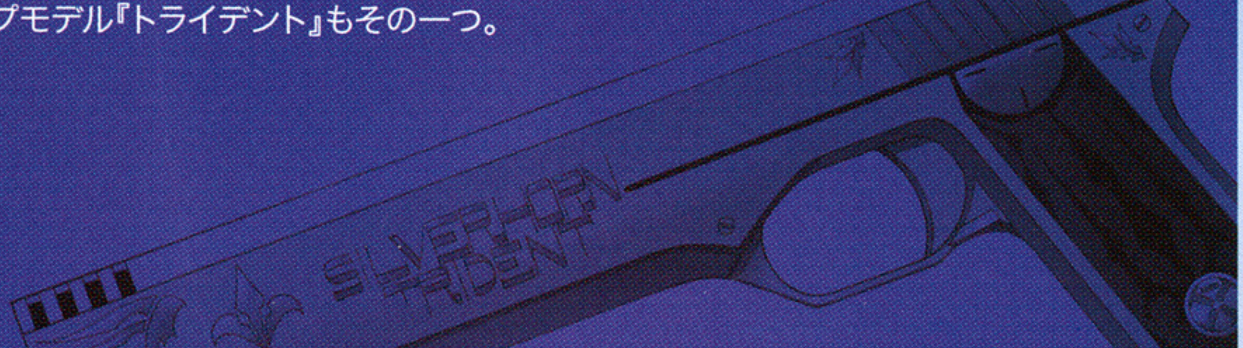
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、その機能については未だ解明されていない。一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

術式補助演算機〔Casting Assistant Device〕

通称CAD。デバイス、アシスタンス、ホウキ（法機）とも呼ばれる。大きく分けて、汎用型、特化型の二タイプが存在する。魔法を発動する為の起動式を、呪文や呪符、印契、魔法陣、魔法書等の伝統的な手法・道具に代わり提供する、現代の魔法技能師に必須のツールである。起動式を展開するスピード、展開できる情報量はCADのハードとしての性能、どれだけ精妙で有効な起動式を展開できるかはCADに組み込まれたソフトの性能に依存する。性能の劣ったCADでも、起動式を簡略化して魔法演算領域内の処理を増やすことで発動速度を上げることはできるが、それは上級者の場合であり、一般的には、CADの処理能力が魔法発動速度の一次的な制約条件となる。

汎用型CADは、多様性を重視したCADで、系統の組合せを問わず一度に最大九十九種類の起動式をインストールできる。ブレスレット形態が最も広く普及しているが、携帯端末形態の物も普及しており、操作時に両手が塞がることを嫌う現場肌の上級魔法師に好まれている。

特化型CADは、多様性を犠牲にする代わりに魔法の発動速度を重視したCADで、照準補助のサブシステムと一体化している物が主流。系統の組合せが同じ起動式を一度に最大九種類インストールできる。拳銃形態、小銃形態を取ることが多い。実弾銃で銃身に当たる部分には照準補助システムが組み込まれており、「銃身」が長いCADほど照準補助機能が充実している。司波達也が持つ、シルバー・ホーンのチューンナップモデル『トライデント』もその一つ。



Shorthand: CAD. Also known as Device, Assistance, Houki. They vary greatly and exist in two types: general purpose and specialized. Activated in order to cast incantations and charms, mudrā, magic spells; an alternative to the traditional techniques and means found in magic textbooks, it's an essential device required in order to master modern day magic. Activation ritual speed, and amount of information deployable, is decided by the CAD's hard disk ability; just how much the refinement and effectiveness of activation can be expanded by is dependent on the performance of the software built into the CAD. Even an inferior performance CAD, by simplifying the activation ritual, can increase the power of the magic processing section, but that is a high level skill and in general, the processing power of the CAD is the primary constraint on how fast magic can be activated.

The general purpose CAD places emphasis on diversity; regardless of the combination of systems it can install up to 99 kinds of activation rituals. The bracelet form is the most widely used, but mobile computer type ones are also in circulation, and they are preferred by senior magic masters who dislike having both hands occupied while operating.

Specialized CADs emphasize speed at the expense of diversity, and aiming support integrated subsystems are mainstream. The system combination allows the installation of the same activation ritual up to 9 times. They often take the form of handguns and rifles. In the barrel where ammunition would normally go auxiliary sighting systems are incorporated, and CADs with extended "barrels" have had their auxiliary sighting function enhanced. The one possessed by Shiba Tatsuya, a tuned up Silver Horn model "Trident", is one of these.

Chapter 6

Just before the school gates closed, in the club headquarters.

"The situation is concerning the Kenjutsu Club's barging in on the Kendo Club's demonstration for new members."

Tatsuya, having witnessed and experienced the event, provided details concerning the attempted brawl — including how after Mibu Sayaka and Kirihara Takeaki started arguing, he had stepped in their struggle and personally challenged the Kenjutsu club — to the three people standing before him.

"Even so, after taking on more than ten opponents, it's a wonder you're still so well."

Facing him to the right, the Student Body president, Saegusa Mayumi.

"To be exact there were fourteen people. As expected of Kokonoe-sensei's disciple I guess."

In the center, the one who in a sense is his boss, the Public Morals Committee chief, Watanabe Mari.

Laughing interestedly — not in the sense of 'strange', but in the sense of 'amusing' — while commenting made her words rather ironic. Though her expression was somewhat insincere, she's probably praising him.

What most impressed Mayumi and Mari (?) was, after overpowering Kirihara, Tatsuya had only defended against the frenzied mob of Kenjutsu club members without attacking. However, Tatsuya had not shown off any techniques worth praising.

He seemed to have the skill of an average high school student, but they didn't know of what level.

That was why those attackers fared that much worse than the Yakumo temple students — they had no idea he could manage fourteen opponents at once and sustain no injuries and how valuable that was.

Instead, Tatsuya's awareness was focused on the 3rd Year male student, on the left side.

It's likely that he is the Club Management Group Leader, Juumonji Katsuto. Bearing the number '10' in his name, the eldest child of the Juumonji house.

(He looks pretty steep alright…)

Standing up, he was about 185 cm. That alone didn't make him a big man to be looked up upon.

Rather, it was the thick chest and broad shoulders and the rippling muscles, easily recognizable even under a uniform.

It wasn't just his physical features; every element that makes up a human seemed to be condensed in him, giving his character an incredibly heavy sense of presence.

As expected of one who stands alongside Mayumi and Mari as part of the First High School Big Three, Tatsuya thought, understanding just from his appearance and impression.

"You didn't see the incident's beginning circumstances?"

Being questioned by Mari, who had changed her expression, Tatsuya snapped back to reality. Once again, he recalled the event of the report he had just finished and replied affirmatively to her question.

"That's right. Whether Kirihara-senpai had provoked the Kendo club or the Kendo club had earlier caused some grievance against the Kenjutsu club, we cannot say for certain."

What he had seen was from the point when Mibu and Kirihara had been quarreling. Along with Erika, they were behind the stands and were about to exit the gym when they heard the buzz of an argument breaking out, but they hadn't heard the contents. By the time he had waded through the crowd and arrived on the scene, both Mibu and Kirihara were at swords' points already.

"Is that why you didn't act straight away?"

That question was from Mayumi.

Katsuto seemed to have assumed the listener's position.

"I intended to intervene only if I deemed things became too dangerous. If they only ended up bruising each other, that's a problem between themselves."

Tatsuya answered Mayumi's question conditionally.

As Mayumi said, Tatsuya had initially taken the attitude of a bystander since he didn't know who he should stop.

You could possibly say that he had the option to simply stop both, but since that would result in him gaining the reputation and notoriety of defeating both of them, that case wasn't considered.

However, that wasn't the only reason. The duties requested of him by the Public Morals Committee was the prevention of magical violence. Neither Kirihara nor Mibu, when they started sparring, had used magic. Had Kirihara not used the magic "Sonic Blade", it was likely that Tatsuya would have simply watched until the end.

"…Well it's fine. It's certainly a fact that we don't have the personnel to intervene in every fight."

The trouble during recruiting was how club headquarters generally handled things. Mari's remark was based on that, so neither Mayumi nor Katsuto objected.

"Then, what did you do with Kirihara?"

"Kirihara's collarbone was fractured, so I handed him over to the Health Committee. That level of injury was easily healed rapidly with magic. He admitted his error in the infirmary, so I didn't judge any further action to be required."

The truth was that while the blow Kirihara sustained from the shinai cracked the bone, it was Tatsuya's slam that broke it. Tatsuya didn't feel the need to add such an extraneous detail.

And as Mari had not actually seen Kirihara's condition, there would be no way to tell.

"Hm… very well. Prosecution is left to the discretion of the apprehender, after all."

Nodding at Tatsuya's words, Mari turned her eyes towards Katsuto.

"It's as you heard, Juumonji. As the Public Morals Committee head, I don't intend to bring this matter to the Disciplinary Committee."

"I'm grateful for your leniency. To have used a highly lethal magic such as Sonic Blade in such a place, even though no one got hurt, we had thought that a suspension at least was unavoidable. I'm sure the person in question himself realized that. We'll give him a full lecture, and make sure he takes this lesson to heart."

"We'll leave it to you."

Katsuto gave a light bow, which Mari returned.

"But, is the Kendo club satisfied with that?"

"They share the same offense of provocation. They're in no position to make a fuss."

Mari brusquely dismissed Mayumi's concern. Mayumi didn't refute her. This was a matter under the jurisdiction of the Public Morals Committee chief. The Club Management Group Leader accepted it, and the Student Body president didn't object. With this, the incident was closed.

Tatsuya paid no attention to the exchange. It was not his job to combat the smoldering fires of discontent.

"Chief, I'm sorry for being discourteous."

By that, Tatsuya was signaling to Mari that he wanted permission to leave.

"Ah, before that, there's one thing I want to confirm."

Mari also had no intention of detaining Tatsuya from his duties (although that would probably be it for today), so her question was brief.

"Was Kirihara the only one who used magic?"

"That is correct."

Tatsuya answered Mari's question simply.

To be precise, Kirihara was the only one who successfully activated magic, is what he should have said, but Tatsuya had no intention of going into such a detailed explanation.

"I see. Thanks for your hard work."

Receiving permission, Tatsuya turned around and left the club headquarters.

◊ ◊ ◊

After coming out of the club headquarters, Tatsuya turned to head towards the Student Council room.

Sunset was only a little while away.

However skilled one was at magic, it was improper for a girl to go out alone at this time, and Miyuki had earlier requested Tatsuya to return home with her.

His plans were to meet her halfway along the road.

The club HQ was in a building separate from the main buildings the Student Council room was in.

In order to get from HQ to the Student Council room, it was necessary to leave the campus for a moment (although there was no need to change shoes, the phenomena known as indoor shoes was rarely seen anymore) and walk around to the main entrance, but there were already some familiar faces waiting there.

"Ah, good work~"

"Onii-sama."

Erika called out first, but it was Miyuki who rushed over to him.

The others stared amazed at that unexpected agility.

"Thanks for all your efforts. Today was rather tiring wasn't it."

"It wasn't a big deal. Good work today as well, Miyuki."

As Miyuki stood before him with both hands clasped onto her bag in front of her, Tatsuya, with a fond look, gently stroked her hair two, three times.

Miyuki half closed her eyes in pleasure as she gazed up at her brother, and their eyes met.

"I realize that they're siblings, but you know…"

As they walked towards the two, with an embarrassed expression, Leo muttered to himself.

"It's almost like a scene out of a painting…"

Beside him, Mizuki, with her face red, stared at the two as if to devour them.

At that, Erika narrowed her eyes towards Leo and Mizuki.

"Hey, you guys… just what are you expecting from those two?"

Shrugging exaggeratedly with both hands extended from her body, shaking her head leisurely from side to side would have looked rather contrived normally, but somehow suited Erika.

"As you said, they're siblings right?"

Her expression, along with those lines, seemed to bring the two back to their senses. In a panic, Leo and Mizuki reacted to that incident in an absolutely eloquent manner.

"D-D-D-D-Don't say such obvious things! I, I wasn't expecting anything at all!"

"Y-Y-Yeah that's right, Erika-chan! D-Don't say weird things!"

"…Yes yes, I'll leave it at that."

Most likely, if not for Erika's chaffing retort, both Leo and Mizuki wouldn't have known where to stop with their misunderstanding.

Unaware of Erika's lone struggle, Tatsuya at long last took his hand from his sister's head and turned to the three.

Miyuki, with a reluctant expression, followed her brother.

Seeing that expression, one would definitely get weird delusions.

However, Tatsuya made no such colorfully suspicious guise and, with a sincere face, called out to his friends apologetically.

"Sorry, I've kept you guys."

The delicate atmosphere dispelled, Leo shook his head with a crisp smile.

"Don't be so distant, Tatsuya. There's no need to apologize."

"I just came from the end of club orientation. I haven't been waiting at all you know."

Mizuki agreed with a soft smile, and also insisted that she didn't require an apology.

"She's also just come from her club. Don't worry about it."

Erika laughed mischievously as usual, and gave a biting remark.

Leo, Mizuki, and Erika; each of the three greeted Tatsuya with their own smiling face.

Tatsuya immediately perceived that their words were contrary to the truth, but he didn't want to waste their thoughtfulness.

"Since it's this late already, why don't we go eat? If it's under 1000 yen each, it's on me."

The current value of currency was worth around twice what the denomination would have been 100 years ago.

For a high school student, 1000 yen was a bit more than usual, but still reasonable.

Instead of swallowing his apology further, he offered an invitation.

There wasn't anyone here who didn't understand that, or felt the need for any unnecessary reserve.

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On the next day of the entrance ceremony, the five talked about the days happenings — clubs they joined, boring housekeeping matters, people who asked their names in an attempt to hit on them, all sorts of experiences, but in the end the topic that drew the most interest was the drama involving Tatsuya.

"That 2nd Year, Kirihara, he used a rank B lethal magic didn't he? It's a wonder you weren't hurt."

"Even though you say it has lethality, in the end, Sonic Blade is a magic with limited application. Apart from having an untouchable blade, it's pretty much no different from a sharp sword. It's not such a difficult magic to deal with."

Responding to a visibly impressed Leo, Tatsuya replied in a tired manner.

"But, didn't you stop someone using it seriously with just your bare hands? Wasn't that dangerous?"

"It's fine, Mizuki. If it's Onii-sama, there's no need to worry."

"You're considerably calm about this aren't you, Miyuki?"

As Miyuki reassured the now somber Mizuki, Erika drew attention to her unnatural confidence.

"Certainly, I can only praise Tatsuya-kun's prowess in being able to handle more than 10 opponents in melee, but Kirihara-senpai's weapon was by no means a blunt sword. Rather, it's more like he ended up slipping out from the midst of all those people.

Miyuki, weren't you worried at all?"

Being accused by Erika, Miyuki's reply was simply,

"Of course not. There is no one at all who can defeat Onii-sama."

An answer without the slightest hesitation.

"—Uhhm…"

Even Erika could only be at a loss for words.

She had seen Tatsuya's techniques up close at that time.

Even through her eyes, Erika could tell that Kirihara's swordsmanship was flawless. And Tatsuya should also have realized that the cutting edge was not inferior to that of a real sword. Not only that, but Tatsuya also hadn't tensed any part of his body — that showed that he hadn't felt any anxiety or fear even on a subconscious level — and had reached up faster than Kirihara could bring down the shinai, grabbed the hilt and slammed him down by the wrist with essentially Aikijutsu. No, rather than Aikijutsu, it might be called No Swords style.

It was no exaggeration to say that such techniques are on the level of an expert. Long before his current age, Tatsuya had already mastered enough techniques to be called, if not a master, then something very close.

Yet even with that, Erika wasn't able to just confidently shrug things off without worrying.

"…I don't mean to doubt Tatsuya-san's ability, but Sonic Blade is far from just a normal sword. I mean it emits ultrasonic waves, doesn't it?"

"Come to think of it, I've heard of something similar. There're practitioners who wear earplugs in order to block out ultrasound. Although, you'd have to be prepared for that from the start."

"That's not it. It's simply that Onii-sama's Taijutsu is superior."

Miyuki laughed lightly as she replied to Leo and Mizuki's concerns.

"Countering magic rituals is Onii-sama's specialty."

Erika immediately latched onto Miyuki's words.

"Countering magic rituals? Not just Data Fortification or Zone Interference?"

"Yes."

Looking between Miyuki who was nodding proudly and Tatsuya who was chuckling with a look of "it can't be helped", Erika could only mutter in shock with an admiring expression.

"That's got to be an amazingly rare skill."

"That's right. Or at least, it's not something taught at high school. And even if you're taught, that doesn't mean anyone can do it. Erika, just after Onii-sama jumped out, do you remember an illusion as if the ground shook?"

"Ye~ah, it wasn't such a big deal for me, but it seemed like there were numerous students suffering symptoms similar to severe motion sickness. Come to think of it, it wasn't just at the start, but also fluctuated during the course of the battle…?"

"That was Onii-sama's doing. Onii-sama, you used Cast Jamming, didn't you?"

Faced with Miyuki's broad smile, Tatsuya could only sigh in resignation.

"I'm unable to match you as always, huh."

"Oh come on. If it's about Onii-sama, Miyuki knows everything."

"No no no no."

Leo interrupted the two as they exchanged smiles and laughter.

"That's not a conversation between siblings is it? In fact that goes beyond the level of lovers."

"You think?" "Is that so?"

After a second, faced with Tatsuya and Miyuki who were in perfect harmony, Leo fell flat onto the table.

"…Trying to throw a tsukkomi against these lovey-dovey siblings will be a difficult task. You stood no chance from the beginning."

To the regretful Erika:

"Ahh, I was wrong…"

Leo responded remorsefully, while rising.

"I'm very much opposed to those words."

Tatsuya objected (?) with a tone one could think was terribly reluctant, and,

"It's not a problem. It's simply a fact that Onii-sama and I share a strong bond of sibling love."

Miyuki lightly soothed her brother.

This time, it was Erika and Leo whose faces hit the table at the same time.

"Gahhh!"

Leo expressed his feelings with a sound effect similar to a spray of blood.

"That's because I love and respect Onii-sama more than anyone else in this world."

Miyuki didn't stop there. In full view of their friends, she nudged her chair closer and snuggled up to Tatsuya, looking up at her brother's close face with a flushed expression.

"Ahhー I think I'll goー homeー now."

With her cheek still firmly pressed to the table, Erika began to sulk.

"Miyuki, there's no need to get carried away alright? We're with people who don't fully understand that we're just playing around."

"…" "…" "…"

As Tatsuya smiled wryly while chiding Miyuki, Miyuki, Erika, and Leo's gaze turned to the one person left.

"…Eh? Eh? Playing around?"

Mizuki, whose face was dyed red, began shifting her eyes restlessly at the sudden silence as everyone held their breath.

"…Well, this is pretty much a characteristic of Mizuki."

"Auu…"

At Erika's sympathetic murmur, Mizuki's face went red for a different reason.

"…In any case, you were talking about something like Cast Jamming?"

Not able to put up with the unbearably prickly atmosphere any longer, Leo forcibly returned to the previous topic.

"Since it's already been revealed, that's right."

To Tatsuya, this was a less than desirable subject, but more than that, he too wanted to do something about this atmosphere. With nothing for it, he joined Leo's conversation.

"Cast Jamming, is it some sort of electromagnetic wave that hinders magic?"

"It's not exactly electromagnetic."

"That was a figure of speech!"

At Leo's retort, Erika smacked him with a straight face, then glanced over at Tatsuya as if nothing had happened.

Cast Jamming is also a magic ritual, but it's a kind of magic that interferes with the phenomenon-altering mechanism of Eidos. In a broad way of speaking, its nature is similar to that of a magic cancelling system.

There's a similar magic that disables the opponents magic called "Zone Interference". This procedure affects a fixed area with the caster at its center without bringing about a change in information, and the technique is such that if the strength of interference is less than that of the defined magic ritual, then the interference will be shut out. In contrast, Cast Jamming scatters vast amounts of meaningless Psion waves, and as such, it is a technique that prevents rituals from affecting Eidos.

Zone Interference in a sense does not reserve magic, but rather directly prevents the opponents' magic, and it is fundamental that the strength of interference be greater than that of the opponents' magic.

On the other hand, Cast Jamming works by overwhelming a Magician's data with a large amount of extra data, greatly reducing the speed of a Magician's data upload to his base station. Therefore, the strength of the interference is not so important. Instead, the Psion noise propagates randomly and rapidly across all the eight varieties of the four Systematic frequencies, and essentially becomes an antennae that blocks all transmissions.

"But for something like that, don't you need some special kind of stone? Anti… anti something…"

As Erika struggled to remember the remnant of the word, it was a somewhat revived Mizuki who came to her rescue.

"It's Antinite, Erika-chan. Tatsuya-san, you have Antinite? I thought it was something really expensive."

Antinite is known to fulfill the same conditions by emitting Psion noise. In theory, it is possible for a magician to evoke noise for Cast Jamming by themselves, but in practice it's exceedingly difficult.

Unlike Zone Interference, under the influence of Cast Jamming, the user's own magic would also be affected, since even if the magician in question consciously tries to tune the noise of Cast Jamming, his subconscious would reject it. (Magic processing takes place in the subconsciousness, and thus the actions of the subconscious have priority over the conscious.)

Because of that, it is thought that in order to use Cast Jamming, it's essential to use Antinite, which satisfies the condition of emitting just Psion noise… but Tatsuya's reply overturned that common sense.

"No, I don't. In the first place, Antinite is a military resource. Price notwithstanding, it's not something a civilian would be able to obtain."

"Eh? But, you said you used Cast Jamming…"

It was not just Erika making a confused face as she spoke out, but Leo and Mizuki as well.

"Ahー I'd like to keep this conversation off record alright?"

Giving Tatsuya puzzled looks as he lowered his voice and leaned over the table, the three nonetheless followed suit.

"To be precise, it's not Cast Jamming. What I used is a practical application of Cast Jamming, 'Specific Magic Jamming'."

At Tatsuya's words, Mizuki's face blanked out as she blinked a few times.

"Uhmm… there's such a magic?"

"I don't think so."

It was Erika who answered Mizuki's question directly.

"Then, doesn't that mean it's a theoretically new magic?"

Erika's voice this time carried not so much a nuance of admiration or surprise, but rather total shock.

The number of Magicians who use original magic is not insignificant. There are also numerous expert Magicians who have been devising original magic since childhood. However, that's just instinctively, and in a way intuitively working out one's own natural magic, and the Magicians who can devise theoretically entirely new magic are few indeed.

Magic is highly dependent on the subconscious.

Even though it's simple to work back towards the theory on magic one's subconscious can use, to make up a new magic theory, even if it's just a variation of an existing magic, requires a full intimate understanding of the structure and operating principles of that magic.

It's not exaggerating to say that devising theoretically new magic at a high school age is insane.

"It's probably more accurate not to say devised, but rather that I discovered it by chance."

At Erika's honest reaction, Tatsuya laughed as he answered.

"You guys know that when you use two CADs simultaneously, Psion waves are given out and it's impossible to use magic in most cases right?"

"Ah, I've had that experience!"

Leo nodded at Tatsuya's words.

"Uwah, how arrogant!"

Erika responded in shock to Leo's line.

"The hell!"

"Using two CADs at the same time.... were you trying to pull off a parallel cast? Thinking you could do something so high tech, I'm at a loss for words."

"Shut up. I thought I could! One day, if the conditions are right I'll definitely be able to do it!"

"No way一 you're joking一 stop it一"

"…I get that you're making fun of me, so could you please stop with that tone? It's incredibly annoying!"

"Y, you two, let's just listen to Tatsuya-san's explanation alright? Ne?"

"…"

"…Hmph."

Erika and Leo looked away from each other.

As Miyuki flusteredly glanced about back and forth between the two, Tatsuya gave a shrug.

"I think that's pretty much enough about me but… you want me to continue? Well, that's also fine I guess…

The point is, when using two CADs simultaneously, the incident Psion waves resembling Cast Jamming envelope a Magician and emit Idea containing Eidos phenomena. If you initiate an interference magic activation ritual with one of those CADs, and start a reverse ritual in the other, those two activation rituals will amplify one another without needing to be translated into magic rituals. Then if you release those Psion waves as a Non-Systematic Magic, each CADs developed activation ritual will naturally build up and the two types of magic rituals that are the result can cause interference to some extent.

Even a persistent magic, such as Sonic Blade, cannot be sustained indefinitely with just one magic ritual. After some time, the formula must be recast. So I simply catch it at that point."

In a small voice, Leo whispered "You gotta be kidding…" The utter lack of inflection along with his stunned look showed that he was utterly serious.

Abruptly, Mizuki began to cough. Because she kept sucking on her straw after her glass became empty, it seemed she'd choked. Once the coughing fit subsided and she regained composure, her expression settled into that of shock.

Erika crinkled her brow and contemplated in silence. From her grim expression, she wasn't enjoying it much, but it didn't seem like she was recalling something bad.

"…I have no idea how to actually do it, although I guess I kinda understand the theory behind it. But why is this all off-record? If you patent it, I'm sure it would be very profitable."

To Leo, who had recovered his faculties somewhat, Tatsuya presented an inscrutable expression.

Tatsuya smiled bitterly as he answered Leo, who was tilting his head, and it was evident that the bitterness ran deep.

"For a start, this technique is still incomplete. It can only be used on magic the opponent is in the midst of casting, and moreover it's not like they can't use it, it's just more difficult. Also, of course I can't use any magic whatsoever myself. That alone is fatal enough, but moreover, being able to interfere with magic without using Antinite is a problem in itself."

"…I don't see how that's a problem?"

As Leo asked with not so much confusion as dissatisfaction, Erika scolded him in earnest.

"Don't be an idiot. The reason is huge. In terms of national defense and security, magic is now indispensable. If the ability to disable magic without great magical strength or the exceedingly expensive Antinite became widespread, the foundations of society could crumble."

"I also believe exactly what Erika said. Within the world, there are supremacists who discriminate against magic, as well as extremists who condemn it. Yet since the production of Antinite is so small, they remain below the surface and are not a real threat. Until a way is found to counter that, I have no intention to publicise this mock Cast Jamming."

Whether he was finally convinced or not, Leo bowed his head numerous times. For some reason, Mizuki was also nodding her head in a similar fashion.

"That's amazing… to have thought so far."

An admiring breath escaped her lips.

"If it were me, I'd probably jump at the chance for fame."

As Leo continued to sigh, Miyuki smiled softly and gave a modest laugh.

"Onii-sama's over thinking things a bit, don't you think? In the first place, being able to read the activation ritual your opponent is in the middle of and projecting CAD interference waves, it's not like just anyone could do it. But then, my Onii-sama's like that I suppose."

"…Are you implying I'm an indecisive, good-for-nothing?"

At his sister's point, Tatsuya made a face best described as no mercy.

"Who knows? Erika, what do you think?"

With an offhand attitude, Miyuki passed the ball to Erika.

"No idea? I think I'd like to hear Mizuki's opinion on this."

Erika, with a deliberate tone, passed the ball to Mizuki.

"Eehh? I, uhm, that is…"

"So no one's denying it…"

Miyuki averted Tatsuya's eyes with a cheerful smirk, as Erika hid her face behind a menu and Mizuki's nervous gaze hovered about everywhere. But no help came from any direction.

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One week had passed.

For Tatsuya, recruitment week had been like the stormy season.

Within the Public Morals Committee, the busiest person was probably him.

—In addition, his duties had changed slightly from before.

On the first day, he had overpowered Kirihara Takeaki, one whose combat magic had been amongst the most promising in the school.

By the time Tatsuya had stepped in, he had already taken damage from Mibu Sayaka, so there are some who view that as the reason he was taken down so easily, but those who had not known the circumstances of the match were only interested in exaggeratedly touting that a 1st Year student, and a Weed at that, had defeated a regular combatant.

As a result—

"Tatsuya, do you have committee work today as well?"

As Tatsuya got ready, Leo handed him his bag.

"I'm off duty today. Seems I finally get a break."

"You've done a great job huh?"

"That doesn't make me the least bit happy."

As Leo stood before Tatsuya, who was sighing in disappointment, he made a face as if barely suppressing a laugh.

"You're a real famous guy now, Tatsuya. The enigmatic 1st Year student who defeated a swathe of Magicians without magic, you are."

"What's up with the 'enigmatic'…"

"According to one theory I've heard, Tatsuya-kun is an assassin sent by the magic deniers."

Popping her head up unexpectedly, Erika was finishing her preparations to leave as well.

"Who the heck is spreading all these irresponsible rumors…"

"Me~"

"Hey!"

"Just joking of course."

"Give me a break… that was too much."

"But, the contents are really true."

Hearing the particulars of the rumor from Erika, Tatsuya once again let out a sigh.

It'd be nice to think that there wasn't a single person who would believe such a hoax, but enough had jumped on the bandwagon to almost lend credibility to the stories.

"That was a pretty big sigh just now?"

"Getting all worked up over other people's affairs… I've felt like I was gonna die three times this week already."

"That's pretty bad."

At Leo, who wasn't even trying to hide his amused expression, Tatsuya had the urge to make a fist, but eventually settled for a third sigh.

The Kenjutsu club's next ace, 2nd Year Kirihara Takeaki, whose strength was widely viewed as top class, had been defeated by a 1st Year Weed.

As stated earlier, this news had greatly startled the ones who believed in the "perfect" magic evaluation process, and caused a not inconsiderable uproar.

They had directed their unreasonable anger and mutual hostility against Tatsuya, even going as far as to take misguided retaliation.

Meaning that their conflict made him the target of their purge.

Even for those who didn't know the specifics, it was easy to guess that the Public Morals Committee chief was on Tatsuya's side, and that both the

Student Body president and the Club Management Group Leader would come to his defense.

If so, then what should be done?

At times like this, the established tactic is to make it look like an accident.

Which is what they did.

They would wait for Tatsuya to approach as he went on patrol, then cause a commotion.

When he went to intervene, they'd shoot off magical attacks under the pretense of misaiming.

That was how the pattern pretty much went.

From Tatsuya's perspective, it simply seemed like disturbances were breaking out one after the other, and they were taking their toll.

Due to his position as a Public Morals Committee member, he couldn't just pass by, and had to try to settle the situation.

On top of that, magic randomly came flying his way daily. Most of them could be avoided or negated before they took effect, but there were always some that couldn't be blocked in time.

He had realized that he was being targeted within a day, but until he could find evidence of collusion it was out of his hands, and by the time he did a week had already passed.

In other words, he was constantly only able to escape from their traps.

He had only caught someone red handed on the fourth day, but in the end, that person escaped.

As expected of students from the prestigious First High school, in general, their tricks were successful. It rather felt like they were using all their strength to demonstrate their excellent capabilities at the entirely wrong time, place and purpose, but still.

"…Come to think of it, I've come out of that rather well, haven't I…"

"From today, restrictions on devices will come into effect, so you shouldn't need to worry anymore, right?"

"I sure hope so."

At Mizuki's comforting words, Tatsuya wearily nodded.

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Even when off from the Student Council, one wasn't off duty. It was not a shift based system in the first place.

Miyuki had work in the Student Council room today as well.

Yet for the siblings, the concept of leaving the other and going back first simply didn't exist.

—Looking at it objectively, there wasn't even any point teasing them with labels such as "brocon" or "siscon" anymore.

Even so,

"I'm terribly sorry, Onii-sama. I'll be making you wait all this time…"

Just by having these concerns, like feeling guilty for keeping the other waiting, showed that they may still be able to be saved.

"Even if I say something like don't worry about it, it probably wouldn't work…"

Laughing affectionately, Tatsuya *pon* *pon* lightly tapped his sister's head.

Rather than saying tapped, it was probably more accurate to say stroked, and, at the tender chastisement, Miyuki half closed her eyes with a look of utter bliss. Other students were also just happening to be walking back and forth along the corridor on their way home.

Confronted with this scene, which was sure to cause misunderstandings everywhere (?), there were numerous hostile glances directed at the two headed towards the Student Council room. However, there was a marked difference in the feelings directed at the couple with the too good relationship, with Tatsuya single-handedly soaking up all the animosity.

When walking alongside Miyuki, up until last week, the primary intent behind the malicious gazes would be scorn.

Now, behind the enmity was, with careful discernment, fear.

Not a fear of strength, but a fear of the unknown.

Also, those who should feel less bitter about his "activities", the Weeds, felt the same way.

Because of that, this became the first time they were called out to by someone unfamiliar.

"Shiba-kun."

Both Tatsuya and Miyuki looked back at the same time.

In terms of physical specs, Tatsuya far exceeded her.

Yet the reason they reacted at the same time in spite of that was because while Miyuki turned reflexively, Tatsuya had spent a period of time debating whether the voice had been intended for him.

It was somewhat husky, but definitely a female voice.

"Good afternoon. Should I start by saying, pleased to meet you?"

Her semi long hair done in a ponytail, she was a rather attractive girl.

The hairstyle had changed, but her face was somewhat familiar to Tatsuya.

"Ah, nice to meet you too. Mibu-senpai, correct?"

To Tatsuya, she was the 2nd Year student from the Kendo club who had kicked off a whole week of headaches.

The Kendo club had been the other party in the incident that had broken out.

She rapidly approached the stationary Tatsuya without a hint of hesitation.

It could be because she wasn't the shy type, or not worried since he was an underclassman — or simply because she was taking him lightly.

Regardless, this was strangely less unbelievable than if she had reservations.

Miyuki, despite being a Bloom, had earlier stopped in front of her brother but now moved to the back.

Standing in such a way as to not be in Tatsuya's view if he needed to focus, yet naturally just within eyeshot, such was her position.

"I'm Mibu Sayaka. In class E, same as Shiba-kun."

Tatsuya's eyes were naturally drawn to her left breast.

Sewn onto the green blazer was a green, plain pocket.

The meaning of 'same' was rapidly deduced by Tatsuya.

"Thanks for earlier. Even though I was saved by you, I never properly expressed my gratitude."

Bound by that friendly smile, most males of the same age would immediately be drawn in.

-- These are words that come easily to one well versed in the use of magic, but it would probably be more appropriate to use the literary term that they 'contained the power to subtly charm one's mind', although when saying literary, it's referring more to popular literature.

"I wanted to properly thank you, as well as have a little talk with you…

Is it possible for you to accompany me for a bit?"

She was probably well aware of the power of her smile to captivate the male students, whether consciously or subconsciously.

However, as Tatsuya constantly had an all too beautiful little sister by his side, he differed in that slight advantage.

"I can't now."

Being rejected so unceremoniously, she didn't seem so much offended as simply taken aback.

"If 15 minutes later is alright with you..."

At Tatsuya's follow up line, Sayaka's expression fell, or rather, she slipped on a blank expression, and after blinking a few times, she finally seemed to take in what had just been said.

"Um, then, I'll be waiting in the café."

While the response was totally different to what she had expected, Sayaka at least successfully managed to extract that one promise from Tatsuya.

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Tatsuya accompanied her only as far as the Student Council room entrance.

If he entered, the possibility of meeting up with Hattori was too high. Since neither would be particularly happy at such turn of events, naturally, Tatsuya simply avoided the Student Council room in which he had no duties.

"I'll be waiting for you in the library then."

Up until yesterday, it had been Miyuki waiting for Tatsuya.

Today was the first time for Tatsuya to be waiting for Miyuki, but he had already simulated such a situation even before admission.

He had known that without a doubt, Miyuki would hold some position of office.

Therefore, he was not at a loss as to what to do with his time.

One of the reasons he had originally come to this school was because of the presence of a large amount of private literature one couldn't access unless they were somehow connected to the National Magic University organization.

"The library is it?"

However Miyuki, who should have known that, questioningly tilted her head to one side. It didn't help that she seemed to be slightly suspicious.

"…That's the plan, but why the doubt?"

"No, it's just that I had thought you now have a meeting with Mibu-senpai at the cafeteria…"

Miyuki's glance focused on a region around Tatsuya's throat.

"Miyuki?"

Even at Tatsuya's call, she didn't raise her head.

It seemed she wouldn't meet his gaze.

Rather, she was averting her eyes.

As to why his sister would take such an attitude, Tatsuya was at a total loss.

Thinking rationally, this would be considered sulking, but concerning this particular sister, it couldn't simply be just that.

Even if he asked, they were standing right in front of the Student Council room, and they were starting to hold people up.

"I won't be having such a long conversation with her. In any case, she's probably simply going to try recruit me to her club."

It felt rather like he was guessing in the entirely wrong direction.

However, a chance to defuse the situation nonetheless appeared.

"…Is that, really all?"

"What?"

"I'm wondering if she's really only trying to recruit you.

I have a different feeling.

I'm not sure why.

But… Miyuki is worried.

That Onii-sama would have such a reputation makes me very happy… but if your true power is found out, there would be many who flock to you out of self interest or gain.

Surely, those that do not would be the exception.

Please, be very careful."

It would be a simple matter to laugh that off as needless worry.

If he had not been Shiba Tatsuya.

If she had not been Shiba Miyuki.

"…There's no need to worry. Whatever happens, I'll be fine."

"That's why! That is exactly what I'm afraid of!"

At last, Tatsuya began to faintly understand what was worrying his sister.

"…There won't be a problem. Whatever happens, I won't cause any grief."

"…It's a promise, Onii-sama."

"Got it.

…Speaking of which, Miyuki, saying that I have gained a reputation simply from high school committee activities is a bit much."

"…It's fine!

There's nothing wrong with that, is there?

To me, Onii-sama's name has the best reputation out there!"

As Miyuki spun around and swiped the card reader, her cheeks, hidden by her flowing black hair, seemed to faintly glow with a red tinge.

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He soon found the one he was to meet up with.

The reason was because Sayaka was standing to the side of the crowd.

"I think it would have been better if you sat down to wait."

"If I did, then Shiba-kun might not have found me, right? I was the one who invited you. It would be a fault on my part."

Whether it was a feminine thing or because she was concerned as a senior, this person really didn't seem to understand herself, Tatsuya thought. She stood out about as much as one possibly could.

Now another troublesome rumor couldn't help but surface.

To be greeted so eagerly by an upperclassman. As such thoughts emerged, Tatsuya sighed inwardly,

Then again, even if only outwardly, he was not one to carelessly pretend.

Meeting for the first time with a lady, it would be rude to keep her waiting.

"In any case, let's sit down. We can talk from there."

"It's not that crowded, so it would be better to sit after we buy some drinks."

That was neither a question, nor a suggestion, but an assertion.

He faintly remembered something startling.

However, he didn't disobey.

Tatsuya got a coffee, while Sayaka had juice; then they sat down face to face at a vacant table.

Sipping at his coffee, Tatsuya sat up with his cup in hand and eyed the opposite seat.

Sayaka was sipping dazedly away through a straw at a bright red liquid.

After finishing off almost two thirds of her drink, she finally looked up.

Their eyes met.

Her expression was vacant, but her cheeks were red.

It almost looked like the juice had come up and dyed her face.

"…Do you like it?"

Tatsuya asked a simple question, but,

"Uu… What's wrong with liking sweet things?! You can say I'm childish as much as you want!"

Suddenly getting angry… or rather, pouting.

If you're going to get that embarrassed, then you shouldn't have ordered it in the first place, Tatsuya thought.

To properly cover her embarrassment, he felt that it may be somehow necessary to correct her defenselessness.

But what he said lay in a different direction.

"I like sweet things too. I haven't had that particular one before, but I often drink juice at home."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah"

"I see…"

That's not really the case, but the Sayaka who was looking down at her chest right now didn't seem like an elder. It was quite the different impression from last week.

"Um, I've been rethinking…

Thanks again for last week. It's thanks to Shiba-kun that I didn't get seriously injured."

She placed her hands on her knees and, correcting her posture, gave a bow.

Whether to say it was something to be expected of a "kendo swordswoman", she changed notably from the "cute schoolgirl" she was just a while earlier.

"You don't need to thank me. I was just doing my job."

Tatsuya, semi automatically processing his thoughts whilst paying no actual attention, gave a bland reply.

"No, it's not just for stopping Kirihara-kun."

However that formal answer didn't seem to put off Sayaka.

"Despite having such a wild duel, the one who spared not just me and Kirihara-kun from punishment, but both the Kendo and Kenjutsu clubs as well, was due to Shiba-kun's insistence, wasn't it?"

"The truth is, it wasn't such a big deal. Apart from Mibu-senpai and Kirihara-senpai, no one else was injured. The subsequent brawl was entirely the fault of the Kenjutsu club, so the Kendo club couldn't be blamed in the least."

"The reason it wasn't a big problem was because of you. Anyone else wouldn't have been able to prevent further injuries to the bystanders. They may have been able to overpower the offender without harm, but even now I still almost can't believe that you pulled it off without incurring extraneous damage. Even though I think you went easy on them, the Kenjutsu club has plenty to be grateful to you for. Along that point, I hurt Kirihara-kun but… I've often heard the excuse, and Shiba-kun may think 'you're just a girl'… if I knew martial arts to that degree, it's something I'd feel as well.

The appeal to not suppress your strength, and display your power openly for all to see, would definitely be there.

Shiba-kun, do you recall that?"

"That's right. I know what you mean."

—That was a lie.

Or at least, half of it was.

He had no concept of having practitioned martial arts.

What he had learnt was merely the concept of combat. He could see the appeal of gaining the efficaciousness to complete objectives, but had no desire to simply show off that strength in any way.

"Right?"

However, naturally for Sayaka, who only began speaking with Tatsuya today, there was no way to know that.

"There's no need to make such a big deal.

In any case, if too many people had come out injured from that melee, then it's likely there would have been numerous issues, but the only one who seemed to have had sustained any injuries at all really was just Kirihara-kun. Both Kirihara-kun and I were prepared for the possibility of getting hurt, so that's not really anyone else's concern."

That's incorrect, Tatsuya thought. One of the problems was that Kirihara had broken the rules by using a high risk magic. The principle during recruitment was to let the clubs handle their own troubles internally. If Sayaka and Kirihara had only been swinging shinai at each other, Tatsuya would not have intervened, and it's likely Mari would not have felt any need to get involved either.

This was what he thought, but he didn't voice it out loud.

"And yet, it seems like so many people have a problem with that. Even now, there are many students who keep going on about the incident over and over. The Public Morals Committee is trying to score points or something aren't they?"

"…Actually, I'm also a member of that committee… I apologize."

"Ah, s, sorry! I didn't mean it like that, honestly!"

Looking down at the bowing Tatsuya with a panicked face, Sayaka, who had become flustered all of a sudden, launched into a hurried explanation.

"What I wanted to say was, Shiba-kun is different from those people. It's because of that that you saved me, and uhm, it's not like I wanted to say bad things about the Public Morals Committee, the only ones I dislike are those guys, and, uh, huh?"

Tatsuya had been expressionlessly watching the wildly gesticulating Sayaka.

…But his eyes were,

filled with laughter.

The rambling series of words gradually petered out to a halt until Sayaka was just silently opening and closing her mouth, having finally noticed Tatsuya's smile, and the embarrassment really started to settle in.

"…Hey, Shiba-kun, is actually quite a bully…?"

Those were words that were quite familiar.

"I don't possess any such specialized trait."

A little white lie. Then straight back to the point.

"In any case, what was it that you wanted to discuss with me?"

"…I'll say it bluntly."

Her lips were forming different sounds, but whether it was because she had resigned herself, or regained her sense of purpose,

"Shiba-kun, won't you join the Kendo club?"

Sayaka, at length, cut to her original intention.

While this didn't exceed his expectations, and it could not be denied this was rather anticlimactic in a sense, his answer was already ready. If she had just come out and said it from the start, they could have finished off nice and quickly, but now with a hint of irritation, Tatsuya immediately replied with his prepared answer.

"I'm going to have to refuse."

"…Could I please hear the reason?"

At that instant answer without even a hint of consideration, Sayaka couldn't hide her shock.

"Let me ask you why you want to recruit me instead. The abilities I possess are completely different to those that are required in kendo. Someone as skilled as Mibu-senpai should definitely know that, right?"

His voice held neither roughness nor provocation, but there was a definite edge to it that would not forgive any concealment.

Sayaka's glance wandered away.

With such a gesture, it was like she was desperately searching for an escape route.

In a sense, that was probably exactly right.

At length she uttered a sigh and, with a resigned look, opened her mouth.

"At a magic academy, the performance of magic is paramount… I knew that from the start, and I certainly did enroll with that in mind, but for that to be the be all and end all, don't you think that's wrong?"

"Please go on."

"It's a certain fact that we're discriminated against in class. Simply because we have no ability. But, a high school life shouldn't involve just that. For magic to be prioritized so much over clubs is totally wrong."

From what Tatsuya had seen this week, he could understand that clubs that did not involve the use of magic received unfair treatment. Indeed, the clubs that did received various backings from the school.

However, that was a sort of propaganda to raise the profile of the Academy, and done so by the school management.

Thinking about it, the passionate girl was not making a distinction between "preferential treatment" and "being snubbed".

However, such a conclusion seemed hasty.

"Just because I can't use magic well, they go as far as to mock my swordsmanship. I can't stand being disregarded any longer. Everything about me shouldn't be denied just because of magic."

Without thinking, she took a strong tone.

Within those words, was something beyond conviction bordering on obsession. Tatsuya certainly sensed it.

While it seemed like she found it uncomfortable to look into Tatsuya's eyes, she nonetheless cleared her throat and continued.

"People like us sought solace in clubs that didn't require magic. There are also many people who think like this in the Kendo club.

This year, we want to create a different club organization and tell the management of our ideas.

Magic shouldn't be everything.

For that, won't Shiba-kun lend us his strength?"

"I see…"

He had simply considered her an idol, but she was closer to a crusader.

Tatsuya laughed at his own blindness.

"…Are you making fun of me?"

Seems she had misunderstood.

If he had left it at that, it would have saved him a lot of trouble later, but Tatsuya went on to say something unnecessary.

"Not at all. I was simply laughing at my own ignorance. I had thought of senpai as merely a beautiful Kendo girl, so I couldn't see beyond…"

He had said the latter portion to himself.

Since he had entered, he had met one beautiful girl after another who were difficult to deal with, so why was he expecting this one to be normal? He felt like laughing at himself.

"Beautiful…"

Since his thoughts were facing inwards, Tatsuya rather failed to notice that Sayaka was suspiciously blushing furiously and mumbling.

"Mibu-senpai."

"Wha, what?"

Stifling the impulse to laugh without even noticing, Tatsuya changed his expression.

Sayaka's voice as she responded was rather heated, but Tatsuya didn't register it.

Then finally, Tatsuya uttered one last unnecessary line.

"After telling your thoughts to the school, what would you do then?"

"…Eh?"

Chapter 7

The lunch scene in the Student Council Room had changed a lot compared to the beginning — which was 2 weeks ago.

First of all, there was no longer any need for the Dinner Server Module.

After Miyuki followed Mari's lead, now even Mayumi was bringing her own bento.

While there was some initial skepticism towards Mayumi's previously unheard of culinary skills (that suspicion only came from Mari), as her skill level rose, she was now fully immersed in the practice of exchanging desserts.

Also, the number of participants had increased.

Unless specifically invited, Azusa usually ate with her peers in the classroom. That being the case, she had been summoned to the Student Council Room on a daily basis recently.

The willful reason behind this, if it could even be called that, was that apparently having only 1st and 3rd Year students would upset the balance. In the face of this, Azusa could only stew impotently over such a development — which was very like her.

For the record, the ratio of men to women was one to four.

If balance was actually an issue then the subject was doomed from the start, but this appeared not to be the problem.

"Tatsuya-kun."

"Yes, Chief?"

Just as everyone had finished eating lunch, Mari called out Tatsuya's name from across the table. (The seating arrangement was as follows: Miyuki sat next to Tatsuya, Mari was across from him, Mayumi across from Miyuki, and Azusa on Mayumi's other side.)

Mari tried to keep her face free of any facial expression, but could not hide her mischievous smile.

Yet, despite having such an expression, she still remained a handsome young lady.

"Yesterday, is it true that you were hustling Mibu from 2nd Year?" (!)

Thank goodness we already finished eating, Tatsuya thought.

If there was still anything in my mouth, that would be a horrible mistake.

"Surely using such coarse language like 'hustling' is unfitting for a lady such as Senpai."

"Ha ha ha, thanks for the reminder. Tatsuya-kun is probably the only one who sees me as a lady."

"Is that so? To not see his own girlfriend as a lady, it appears that Senpai's boyfriend isn't much of a gentleman either."

"That's not true! Nao is..."

At this point, Mari closed her mouth; her expression clearly said "That's torn it."

"..."

Towards his immediate superior — even though it was just the school's Chief of the Public Moral Committee — Tatsuya's face remained blank as he stared back.

"..."

"..."

"...Why aren't you saying anything?"

"...Anything you would like to comment on?"

In Mari's peripheral vision, a head of thick, wave-like black hair was bobbing up and down.

Even though she didn't want to, Mari still directed her gaze towards it.

Just as she expected.

Mayumi's back was to her as her shoulders shook uncontrollably.

She stared at this for half a second.

And immediately looked elsewhere.

Her eyes caught Tatsuya's gaze.

"...So, is it true that you were 'hustling' Mibu from the Kendo Club?"

It looked like she was trying to erase the previous scene.

Tatsuya glanced behind Mari.

Mayumi brought her laughter under control and shrugged her shoulders like an actress.

—There was no avoiding it.

Here, it's probably better to go with the flow, Tatsuya thought.

"That being said, can we stop using the term 'hustling'... This sets a poor example for Miyuki..."

"...Um, Onii-sama? By any chance, are you mistaken about Miyuki's age...?"

Miyuki reluctantly voiced her objection, but quickly retreated at Tatsuya's gaze.

Once again, silence returned to the scene.

Unfortunately, the dice had already been cast.

If this were shogi, there might have been some way to avoid it.

But given the mood at the scene... Alas, even Tatsuya could do nothing to change it.

By definition, perspective was something operated behind the scenes to bring about a certain outcome.

"...There was no such thing."

"Oh, is that so?

I heard that someone witnessed Mibu blushing furiously in a certain someone's company."

Tatsuya suddenly felt a cold draft emanating from beside him.

"Onii-sama...? Please, what is she talking about?"

This was not a misconception. Centered around Miyuki, the room's temperature was dropping dramatically.

"M-magic...?"

Azusa yelped in surprise.

Modern magic theory has spread to the domain of Superpower research.

In other words, one branch of modern magic focuses exclusively on the development of Superpowers.

The biggest difference between Ancient Magic and Superpowers is the need for additional activation steps beyond mere thoughts.

An example of this would be that modern magics do not require a CAD to activate.

At the same time, this does not mean that modern magics are the same as Superpowers.

Generally speaking, "Superpower Users" can only use one type; any more would only be variations of the original.

"Superpowers" systematized modern magic. By using Activation Sequences as raw materials and Magic Sequences as the method, this allowed the number of different magics to grow exponentially.

However, modern magics have also been overly differentiated, so if measured by the same standards as Superpowers, there would only be roughly twenty or thirty types. Even then, this would be an overwhelmingly larger number.

Modern Magicians use Magic Sequences to create elaborate magics. At the same time, for Magicians to use multiple types of magics, in addition to using Magic Sequences as a medium, they also need to use their own spirit to adapt to them.

Specialized magic, if refined to the point where it is on par with Superpowers wielded by Magicians, could be activated by pure thought without the need for intent or will.

However, for Magicians that use dozens of types of magic, to be able to activate magic without intent is pretty much impossible.

While Magic Sequences are processed in the subconscious, it still operates with intent, because unintentionally creating a Magical Sequence and subsequently activating it is impossible.

If a Magician capable of multiple types of magics unintentionally activated magics...

"That phenomena rewriting ability is quite strong..."

In response to Mayumi's murmuring, Tatsuya could only reply with a forced smile.

Even after expending the bulk of the "Superpower", the remainder still had the phenomena rewriting ability to change "reality".

Accidental magic, while a sign of magical immaturity, is also clear evidence of superb magical ability.

"Relax, Miyuki. I was just starting to explain. First, rein in your magic."

"I'm terribly sorry..."

Hearing her brother's voice, Miyuki drooped her head in shame as she started to regulate her breathing.

The room temperature stopped dropping.

"There's no need for air conditioning in the summer."

"It only takes an instant for the heat of summer to turn into frostbite."

Rather than trying to smooth things over, Mayumi's comment was phrased as a joke to resettle herself, to which Tatsuya glossed over.

Afterwards, Tatsuya conveyed Sayaka's conversation to everyone present.

"It appears that the movements of the Public Moral Committee have caused some level of backlash amongst the students."

Those last words cast a pall of gloom over Mari and Mayumi's faces.

"But, to say that we're doing this to score points, is this true?

At the very least, I have not heard of such a thing in the past week."

"Neither have I.

Due to my position, I have not inspected the actual premises, but given the disorderly state of things, it would be more appropriate to say that the Public Moral Committee has been overly lax."

In response to Tatsuya and Miyuki's comments, Mayumi expressed a forlorn expression while Mari shook her head and replied.

"That would be Mibu's misunderstanding. Maybe she was just overthinking things.

The Public Moral Committee is a purely honorary position, meaning there are no achievements or awards to speak of. Just like in actual combat situations, the evaluation of practice maneuvers holds no additive value."

"...That being said, it is true that they hold considerable power on school premises.

Especially for students that are dissatisfied with the school system, the Public Moral Committee members responsible for maintaining school rules are no better than being the dogs of those in power.

In other words, someone is manipulating this impression from the shadows."

Tatsuya could not feel unsurprised at Mayumi's words.

Unexpectedly, profound words.

"Do we know their identity?"

For him, this was the logical next step.

"Eh? No, because of the source of the rumors, it's not very easy to find out..."

"...If we acted on the individual in question, it is true that we may stop it."

But, to Mayumi and Mari, this was an unexpected line of questioning.

Mayumi's earlier comment was also something she let slip on accident.

Tatsuya looked directly into Mayumi's eyes.

Immediately, Mayumi turned aside to avoid his gaze.

This was the first time Tatsuya saw Mayumi faltering like this.

"What I'm asking is not the identity of the rumormongers, but the identity of the manipulator behind them."

Tatsuya felt something tugging on his sleeve.

As he shifted his vision, he found Miyuki tugging his sleeve beneath the table.

She was probably hinting that the conversation was too confrontational.

However, Tatsuya had no intention of backing down at this point.

In his mind, the vision of the individual who fled after attempting to ambush him arose. Also, he could not forget the red and green bracelet that some of the students wore.

"For example, a 'Blanche'-like organization?"

Faltering transformed into utter shock.

Mayumi, with Mari alongside her, froze.

Azusa's eyes widened as she stared at the two of them.

From her reaction, Azusa had no idea what was going on — Tatsuya thought.

"How, do you know that name..."

"It's nothing really, since it's hardly classified information. Even if there is censoring involved, frankly it's impossible to completely stifle any and all leaks from the source."

From Tatsuya's perspective, for Mayumi to be shocked to this level was even more amazing.

The International Anti-Magic Political Organization "Blanche".

Their manifesto called for an end to political systems that treated Magicians as superior, and eliminating the difference in treatment caused by the presence of magical abilities.

However, the idea that this country's Magicians received preferential treatment from the political system was false.

To be precise, since Magicians were treated like tools to be used by the military and other government branches, to say it was "inhumane" treatment would be closer to the truth.

This was because when compared to the neighboring country with the highest population in the world, there was no other way to match the sheer difference in the number of troops that could be mobilized besides adopting a quality over quantity approach.

It was true that Magicians serving in the military or the government received a higher salary, but that was in compensation for increased labor as well as expended life energy.

The criticisms leveled by the Anti-Magic Organizations focused solely on the lack of their own benefits, and thus created anti-establishment organizations, of which "Blanche" was the most active.

Thanks to the political freedom guaranteed within this country, criticism directed towards the government was not banned or suppressed.

Historically, the Anti-Magic Movement had always been easily linked with criminal activity. In reality, there were several examples of Anti-Magic Organizations delving into terrorism.

The present incarnation of Blanche, an organization that put the Department of Public Safety on high alert, was such an example.

Also, the bracelet worn by the student that attempted to use magic to ambush Tatsuya bore the emblem belonging to "Egalite", one of "Blanche's" subordinate organizations.

Presently, there was no direct link between Blanche and Egalite, but using the Blanche name was an effective advertising method for attracting anti-establishment youth.

Anyone remotely familiar with the proceedings would know this.

The total number of people that had infiltrated the campus was currently unknown, not to mention that the ambushing student may have been the one responsible for all this.

However, given that the infiltrators were personnel with actual combat capabilities and not mere ideological sympathizers, it was very likely that they had made extensive preparations for First High.

"Nothing positive can come out of trying to cover these things half-heartedly. Hm, I wasn't criticizing the President, it's just that the government's approach is too ineffective."

Despite Tatsuya's comforting words, Mayumi's expression did not brighten.

"...No, it's just as Tatsuya-kun said.

Since organizations that view Magicians as enemies already exist, no matter how unreasonable they are, rather than using inappropriate methods to cover their existence, we should bring the truth to light and promote information exchange on both sides...

We avoided the direct confrontation — no, we escaped from it."

Now, her tone turned self-reproachful.

"That can't be helped."

The liberating response was tinged with a cold tone.

"This school is a state-run facility.

With our status as students, despite not being actual public servants, we cannot escape the fact that any school-related activities or student council members are limited by governmental policies."

"Eh?"

In a voice devoid of warmth, as if the incoming comment could not be properly processed in the brain, Mayumi stared blankly at Tatsuya.

"...In other words, given the President's position, the only thing you can do is deal with this business in secret."

As she stared at Tatsuya, who looked away, Mari bent her lips.

"Ho ho, so even Tatsuya-kun has a gentle side."

"But, the one who kept questioning the President was Shiba-kun..." Azusa softly murmured.

Mari immediately followed up the attack.

"Bring them down then pull them up by yourself, that's quite the gigolo's trick. Even Mayumi is not immune to such a display. It looks like we can't underestimate Tatsuya-kun."

"W-wait, Mari, don't say such strange things!"

"Your face is red, Mayumi."

"Mari!"

The Student Council President and Chair of the Public Moral Committee started going back and forth.

During this time, Tatsuya looked skywards with an unreadable expression.

Even knowing that his sister was coldly gazing at him this entire time, the only thing he could do was pretend not to see it.

"Okay... It's about time to return to class.

Let's go, Miyuki."

Tatsuya expressed his intent to return towards the still bickering Mayumi and Mari, and then rose from his seat.

Miyuki's foul mood was thankfully dispelled by Tatsuya's earnest comforting.

Even though he saw a completely red Azusa flee towards the console in the corner of the room, this was not something Tatsuya paid any extra attention to.

"Ah, Tatsuya-kun, wait a second.

I say, Mayumi, stop, stop, I have something important to say."

"...It's probably best to wait until after school, then we can have a proper conversation."

"Got it, got it... Really, didn't think he'd care that much...

So Tatsuya-kun, how did you reply in the end?"

"I'm the one waiting for a reply, and I will decide after hearing that."

Yesterday in the cafeteria, Sayaka was unable to answer the question Tatsuya posed.

—After telling your thoughts to the school, what would you do then?

Sayaka could only make an "Ah" or "Oh" type of sound, and was unable to frame a meaningful answer.

Thus, Tatsuya left her with some homework.

He would listen to her again after she had sorted through her thoughts.

"Because of our earlier conversation, I feel that this isn't something we can ignore."

"—We're relying on you."

"There's no need for that. I'm not sure what this is about yet."

"As long as it's within your capabilities."

"It's kind of hard to tell whether there are expectations riding on this or not... Forget it, I can accept it if it's only this level."

This was truly something that couldn't be ignored, and Tatsuya wasn't just being polite. In terms of the activities from Anti-Magic Organizations, if it remained only at the systemic level, then there would be no need for him to interfere, but violence directed towards people in important positions was another story. As the representative for all 1st Year Students, there was no guarantee that Miyuki would not be a target. Granted, he didn't believe that any cheap parlor tricks from criminals could harm Miyuki, but it was better to err on the side of caution.

"Within my ability, I shall do my utmost."

As she watched Tatsuya respond and Miyuki bow in departure before leaving, Mari softly muttered to herself.

"That, would probably bring about the best result."

◊ ◊ ◊

Due to the nature of the job, Public Moral Committee members did not need to report to headquarters every day.

Even the Chair spends most of her time in the Student Council Room.

Because most of the members were selected for their martial skills, work skills and organization were not their forte. Add on the lack of input from management, and this was how the room turned into a disaster zone.

Prior to Tatsuya's intercession during the recruitment week, he was the only one with a background in work skills, and thus — regardless of his desire — this had established his position within the Public Moral Committee.

Today, despite being his day off, Tatsuya had been called in by Mari to help organize and write the reports for the recruitment week incidents. —Even though he was called in to help, in reality he was the only one working on it.

This situation was truly out of his control.

He originally planned to use the time after school to browse the unreleased files stored in the magic universities and affiliated magic high schools using the terminals in the school library, but thanks to this and that, his research had gone nowhere.

(At any rate, let's finish all the reports by today...)

Despite knowing that it was meaningless, Tatsuya couldn't stop himself from sighing. He planned on logging out of the terminal, then meeting up with Miyuki.

Just like reading a stopwatch, the screen chimed an incoming message notification.

It even included the school emblem.

In other words, this was not something that students could ignore — a summoning notification that usually entailed a lesson from the staff.

Tatsuya adjusted his posture in the chair and, of course, did not ignore the message and opened it.

The sender's name was "Ono Haruka".

◊ ◊ ◊

"Sorry for calling you here out of the blue."

"No, I didn't have anything urgent on my end."

In the Counseling Room, to Haruka's completely guilt free smile and apology, Tatsuya merely replied blandly.

To tell the truth, summoning him actually threw a wrench in his plans.

Although it wasn't urgent, but to refuse Mari's request and apologize for the inconvenience only led to piling up more work for him.

And when he told Miyuki he had to cancel walking home together, while she remained outwardly calm, just thinking about how to calm her mood when he got back was giving him a headache.

To top it all off, there was no reason why he needed to see the school counselor.

Tatsuya really wished she would tell him why he was called here.

"Well? Have you acclimated to school life yet?"

She shouldn't be able to hear Tatsuya's thoughts — naturally, that was impossible, Tatsuya thought — so Haruka asked a typical question.

"No."

On the other hand, Tatsuya gave an atypical answer.

"...Have you encountered any difficulties?"

"There were a lot of unexpected situations that distracted me from studying."

In other words, get to the damn point and stop wasting my time.

Even if she couldn't hear this voice, she could more or less detect his unfriendly attitude. Haruka's smile grew a little forced as she crossed her legs.

Beneath the mini-skirt, the derriere wrapped in silk stockings could almost be seen.

For the two people sitting face to face with one another, there were no obstacles to obstruct vision.

According to modern decorum, it was advisable to keep revealed flesh to a minimum.

Because women usually wore thick stockings that covered everything beneath their dresses, even when exuding maturity, this sight was quite stimulating to the eyes. (Also, thanks to the advancements in fiber materials, even wearing this during the heat of summer would yield no discomfort.)

Speaking of which, she was also wearing a rather open shirt, where the lines of the undergarments could be seen.

For a faculty member to wear this in front of a student was overly flirtatious.

"...What is it?"

Haruka mischievously asked Tatsuya, who had unknowingly been staring at her.

He would hurriedly shift his line of sight and reply in a distracted voice — if he was any ordinary man.

"From the perspective of the modern dress code,

I feel that Ono-sensei's appearance is slightly overkill."

"I-I'm sorry."

At Tatsuya's cold gaze and completely unexcited vocal warning, Haruka quickly returned to her ordinary posture.

Using temptation to cause the opponent to falter was one of the most common tactics for seizing the initiative in conversations. It was likely that Haruka chose this particular wardrobe with this in mind. But this student (Tatsuya) betrayed no expression as he replied.

No way to control him.

Haruka was perplexed at her inability to seize the initiative.

"So, why was I called here?"

Even though it was suppressed, there was still a hint of a reprimand in the tone.

It couldn't be that this attitude was all within his calculation, could it? Haruka thought to herself.

He was only sixteen, but precisely because she wanted to avoid this hubris, she forced herself to use a temptation method she was not accustomed to. However, at this point she was forced to abandon this roundabout tactic.

Haruka made up her mind and turned to Tatsuya once again.

"Today, I wanted to ask Shiba-kun to help with our work."

"Your work, eh?"

His intellect was formidable, based on the entrance examination scores alone.

Despite that, if she were to cut into the heart of the problem right away, it may put him on guard even more.

"Yes, us, as in the work of the Life Counseling Department."

Haruka told him directly, though he probably already saw through it.

However, given that she had already said "the work of the Life Counseling Department", the only thing she could do was finish her sentence.

"The mental orientation of the students changes every year.

For example, Shiba-kun uses the term 'myself' to address yourself.

For magical students who aspire to join the military, this isn't anything strange. Given that, students only referred to themselves as 'myself' after the victory at the Okinawa Defense Battle three years ago.

Changes in society bring about subtle changes within student personalities. This is especially the case after a major incident, causing individuals to view their age or relation to others differently."

After saying this, Haruka studied the young man's expression.

Tatsuya's face betrayed no confusion, though it might be more correct to say that her words went in one ear and out the other.

"So every year we examine roughly 10% of the students.

The goal is to properly examine and counsel the students' primary impressions and ideologies."

"In other words, we are specimens for observation?"

Blunt and straight to the point, but there was no sense of outrage or fury accompanying it.

"If that's all there is, I have no problem with it. However, what is Sensei's true purpose?"

With a slight smile, he responded with his own question.

Haruka used every ounce of willpower to resist faltering.

"...You think I have an ulterior motive? I'm quite hurt. I'm not that kind of scheming woman, you know?"

The coquettish, almost joking tone, rather than being conciliatory, was in fact used to help refocus her panicking self.

"For a specimen, I don't think I fit the mold very well."

"That's true. I also think that Shiba-kun is not a typical student.

But because of this, I hope that you are willing to help.

You may be the first example to break the barrier between Course 1 and 2 students, but there's no guarantee you will be the last."

"...In that case, we'll treat it like that then."

Haruka relaxed after finally persuading him. Even though he didn't seem completely convinced, helping complex personalities was part of the job description for counselors, Haruka said to herself — with a hint of escapism.

"Looks like my immaturity has caused Shiba-kun to distrust me. Such a shame.

...So, do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Ah, please go ahead."

Even knowing that he was still wary against her, they couldn't waste any more time.

Haruka brought out the prepared questions and went down the list with Tatsuya.

Counseling was a line of work that heavily emphasized privacy. Confidentiality was an important part of work. That being said, it was still dependent on the topic involved. A third party may be involved to assist in the matter, but Haruka's request for assistance was unlikely to touch on the privacy of individuals outside of campus. The fairly straightforward questions involved the events between the day of enrollment and now.

Following Tatsuya's description of the disturbances on campus, Haruka's response was:

"...Thank you very much.

Speaking of which, you pulled through fairly well.

After going through such intense mental pressure, even suffering a mental breakdown wouldn't be a surprise."

The opinion was spoken with a doctor-like expression.

In reality, Tatsuya used the title "Sensei" because Haruka was a licensed psychologist, but her current capacity should be a student counselor.

"From a medical perspective, that may be the case.

But even for statistical data, there will be exceptions."

At the assertion that clinical data was nothing more than the byproduct of statistical data, Haruka shamefully averted her gaze.

As her gaze drifted, Haruka noticed Tatsuya was gazing at the antique (or maybe wrong era) clock on the wall — of course, this was because Tatsuya intentionally wanted Haruka to notice — and hurriedly shifted her gaze back.

"Uh, that's all I have for today.

...Oh yes, while it's not a question related to counseling..."

"What is it?"

"Is it true that Shiba-kun was asked out by Mibu-chan from 2nd Year?"

"...Truly an unrelated question."

Tatsuya could not hide his dumbfounded expression.

Haruka quickly followed up.

"If it's Mibu-chan, then there are some concerns about... Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to divulge them."

"Learning of other people's privacy would cause me difficulties as well.

So, where did Sensei hear these rumors?"

"So they're... rumors?"

"Just rumors, or is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing at all... Hm, I just wanted to ask you a favor if Shiba-kun decided to go out with Mibu-chan.

However, if Shiba-kun isn't planning on it, then don't worry about it."

"I've already said that the so-called going out was a mere rumor.

So, where did these things come from?"

At Tatsuya's repeated question, Haruka dropped her gaze to the floor.

"I'm sorry, that's confidential."

Tatsuya did not pursue.

"In that case, I will take my leave."

Rather than pursuing, he chose to stand up from the seat, and headed towards the door without waiting for a reply.

"If there's anything troubling that happens with Mibu-chan, please feel free to discuss it with me."

Haruka's voice rang out as if she firmly believed in it.

Why did it feel like she was assured that "something troubling" will happen.

Tatsuya was not interested in the reason behind her faith, so he kept walking without turning around once. His personality wasn't cute enough to bite at this kind of bait.

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After dinner, Tatsuya was facing the console in his room when a voice came from the other side of the door.

"Onii-sama, it's Miyuki."

In reality, there were only Tatsuya and Miyuki in the house.

Her identity was obvious even if she didn't say anything after knocking. Simply calling out was sufficient.

Even so, Miyuki would still solemnly pronounce her name.

As if she wanted to carve her name onto Tatsuya's heart.

As if she was terrified that Tatsuya would forget her name.

"Come in."

Tatsuya said while still facing the screen.

From outside the doorway, the console appeared to be embedded into the side wall.

While swiftly browsing through the long lines of text, Tatsuya also caught his sister's silhouette through his peripheral vision.

"The cake Onii-sama wanted is here... Would you like some tea?"

The invitation tinged with a little hesitation was intended to arouse her elder brother's notice.

To Tatsuya, it was only a cake, but this polite attitude was one of his sister's merits — whether anyone else could display the merit to this level was another story.

Also, a hundred years ago no one would use the phrase "the cake is here", but now this has become a common stock phrase.

With the advancements in the logistics system, "carrying around luggage" has become a thing of the past.

Even small items such as cake can be delivered free of charge.

Of course, for the stores in question, receiving orders and then delivering the goods were weighed against the two advantages of "reducing overstock" and "raising customer flow", thus leading to the service today.

"I'm on my way."

After replying, Tatsuya saved the intelligence on the screen as one of the homepage bookmarks.

After savoring Miyuki's favorite chocolate cake and washing down the remaining sweetness with some bitter coffee, Tatsuya shifted the living room's console to data viewing mode.

"...May I take a look as well?"

Tatsuya hadn't finished eating his cake yet, not to mention Miyuki who was even slower.

However, Tatsuya still opened the data files, signifying his assent.

"Of course."

Even after doing so, he still gave a clear verification to Miyuki, who was seeking permission, allowing her to sit down.

"The subject would not be broached normally during family time, but go ahead. It's not like this has nothing to do with you, so it's better for you to know as soon as possible.

...No, I mean, you don't have to be so nervous."

Seeing his sister put down her fork and adopt a proper posture, Tatsuya indicated that there was no such need.

At Tatsuya's bitter smile, Miyuki replied with an embarrassed smile and once again picked up her fork.

"Data File, Blanche, Open."

Of course, there was no keyboard on the dinner table used for food.

While he didn't like it, Tatsuya still used voice commands to direct the system to list the files of the investigation results on the screen.

"Is this the political organization that engages in anti-magic activities that we talked about during lunch?"

"The members call themselves a citizen's movement. In secret they're quite the infamous terrorist group.

Also, it looks like it's true that members of this group are active within the school. Subordinate to Blanche is another organization called Egalite. During my time as a Public Moral Committee member, I saw the figure of students that possibly joined Egalite."

Miyuki was initially surprised at Tatsuya's words, then nodded her head.

"Pro Anti-Magic students in a magic high school?"

"Your skepticism is natural."

At Miyuki's confusion, Tatsuya nodded to indicate his agreement.

"Not just in First High. People believe that magic schools can help them improve their magic, thus leading them to attend. Whether they are trying to advance themselves or for someone else is another story.

Thus, for students at a magic high school to reject magic seems self-contradictory."

Completely self-contradictory. From Tatsuya's perspective, even though society had applied the inferior label to him, but from the viewpoint of a magical researcher, he had no intention of rejecting magic.

"While taking the obvious logical path would make this seem odd...

It's precisely because this organization does follow the 'obvious logic' that they are able to spread so fast."

"...Why is that the case?"

"If you consider this through the traditional lens, you would only run into a dead end.

Rather than staying inside the box, consider this from another angle.

The first item for consideration is, why do they proudly wave their anti-magic ideology banners, but never directly reject magic itself."

"Now that you mention it... That's true."

"Their proposal is to abolish the differences in society caused by magic. Just this, by itself, is an unimpeachable and correct idea."

"...Yes."

"In that case, what is this so called difference?"

"An individual's talent or hard work does not reflect adequate compensation from society...?"

"I just said, Miyuki, think outside the box."

As he said this, Tatsuya picked up the remote control from the table, and turned to the screen.

There were sixteen different pictures, one of them was brought forward and magnified.

"Blanche is a political organization on the surface. Their evidence for Magicians receiving preferential treatment comes from the difference in salaries between Magicians and non-Magicians.

The difference they speak of is the difference in mean wages.

But that's nothing more than an average, a single result.

They do not consider the extent of hardships that Magicians go through to obtain their high salaries.

They also ignore the fact that Magicians are only allowed to work in fields pertaining to magic, even if these backup Magicians would receive lower salaries than ordinary office workers."

Tatsuya's voice was bland and almost completely emotionless. However, a tiny trace of melancholy could be detected.

"No matter how capable or strong, so long as society does not need that magic, monetary compensation and recognition remain impossible."

Miyuki painfully lowered her gaze.

Tatsuya stood, paced a few steps, then tenderly placed a hand on his sister's shoulder.

"There is a reason why Magicians have such a high mean salary. That is because society requires certain specialized Magicians.

Because there are a small number of outliers that throw off the average, the mean salary becomes so high.

Next, for Magicians active on the frontline and capable of contributing to society — no, that's overly embellishing it. It is because Magicians can provide society some sort of benefit, monetary or otherwise, that grants them larger compensation, and not merely for the fact that they are born Magicians.

The world of Magicians is not naive enough to believe that simply being born with magical talent guarantees prosperity.

This, I think we are well aware of.

Right, Miyuki?"

"Yes... Very well aware."

Miyuki nodded as she put her hand atop her elder brother's hand.

"Thus, Blanche proposes to abolish the difference in salaries caused by magic, but in the end is really advocating the abolishment of using magic to obtain monetary compensation.

In other words, they are asking Magicians to selflessly contribute to society."

"...That's quite the self-centered proposal.

Everyone needs money to live, regardless of whether or not they can use magic. But, they don't allow Magicians to use magic for a living, even people who are capable of using magic must use other skills to make a living...

In the end, just because they don't know how to use magic, they don't want magic to become the measuring stick for a person's value?

Are they saying that it's okay if Magicians' hard work cannot receive compensation? It should be obvious that their hard work is not valued...

Or do these people not know that simply being born with magical talent is not enough? That using magic requires many years of intense studying and training?"

Tatsuya moved away from Miyuki's back and returned to his seat with a thin smile on his lips.

"No, they know.

They know, but don't say it.

Because if they don't say it or think about information that contradicts them, they are able to use equality to lie to themselves and others.

Miyuki asked this in the beginning.

Why would magic students join the activities of Anti-Magic Organizations like Blanche or Egalite?"

"Hm... Is it because they don't know the real philosophy behind the anti-magic parties?"

"People that can't use magic cannot learn it no matter how hard they try, and thus feel that it is unfair for society to reward Magicians for using magic.

Then, how about the students who can use magic, but lack the talent to catch up to the truly outstanding students regardless of their diligence, and in turn are looked down upon — this type of thinking would be perfectly reasonable, right?

Differences in talent is not unique to magic. This is apparent in other fields, such as the arts or athletics.

Even if they don't have talent in magic, maybe they have talents in other areas.

If they cannot bear to have no talent in magic, then they should find another path."

If someone who was only superficially acquainted with Tatsuya heard these words, they might have thought he was saying this to himself. But Miyuki, the only person present, would never make that kind of mistake.

"I believe that people who learn magic reject the 'differences' caused by magic, because they are unwilling to abandon magic.

Unwilling to give up, but unable to accept being second-rate.

Unable to accept the truth that there are people with such talent that are completely beyond their grasp.

Unable to accept the possibility that putting in many times more work still puts them out of reach.

Thus, they reject using magic as an assessment.

The fact is, they know that the people with talent also put in the same amount of work. This is evident before their eyes. But, they choose to ignore this and pile all the responsibility on inborn talent, and reject it.

Well... It's not like I can't understand that sense of weakness. I have similar thoughts myself."

"There is no such thing!"

Miyuki knew that Tatsuya was not really depreciating himself. Even so, Miyuki could not control her own voice.

"Onii-sama possesses skills that no other person can emulate, and while you don't have the same talents as other people, haven't you still put in exponentially more hard work to get to this point?"

Tatsuya did not possess any mundane skills, but possessed talents that far exceeded anyone else's. This, Miyuki knew better than anyone. And, even if it was Tatsuya himself, Miyuki would allow no one to deny it.

"That's just because I have other talents as well."

"Ah..."

But Tatsuya was someone who, while understanding Miyuki's statement, could still "understand that sense of weakness". Miyuki blushed when she realized how shallow her rebuttal was.

"If someone isn't talented enough in modern magic, then use some other method to make up the difference.

Because that is possible, then they can objectively make an assessment as a third party.

If that's not possible... Then it's not surprising for them to sink into that delicious fantasy called 'equality'. Even knowing that it's all an illusion in the end."

"..."

Miyuki could not refute any of her brother's cold words. She already understood what Tatsuya was trying to express. He was not being sentimental or pitying towards others, merely talking about the "weakness that lies within people", including himself.

"For people without talent, to escape the fact that they cannot compare to others, they loudly sing the praises of equality.

For those without magic, to avoid the fact that magic is merely one type of talent, they coat that belief with jealousy.

After understanding these basics, what is the purpose of the one inciting them to action behind the scenes?

The equality that they are referring to is equal treatment regardless of the presence of magical ability.

Abolishing the societal differences caused by magic, is the same as not assigning magic any value.

The end result is that magic would lose any and all meaning in society.

In a society where magic has no value, magic cannot advance or improve.

Standing behind the Magicians and ordinary people who are calling for an end to the differences caused by magic, is a force that plans to abolish magic from this country."

"Then what...?"

"Regardless of good or bad, magic is power. Economics is power, technology is power, military strength is power.

Magic can become the same power as battleships or fighter jets. Presently, every country is researching magic's military utility.

There are many military spies active around magic skills and information."

"Then, while the initial goal of the anti-magic parties is to abolish magic in this country, the final objective is reduce the nation's power?"

"Most likely.

Thus, they would even resort to methods like terrorism.

Now, after the nation's power has been reduced, who stands to benefit the most?"

"You mean... Put it that way, behind them is..."

"That's exactly how it is.

When it comes to these people, the Ten Master Clans won't leave them alone.

Especially the Yotsuba Clan.

So, from now on, we have to be extra careful."

Afterwards, nothing more was said.

For these two people, nothing more needed to be said.

Her expression completely pale, Miyuki nodded towards her elder brother.

Chapter 8

With the end of recruitment week, the various enrollment activities came to a close.

For Tatsuya's class, their technical skills curriculum started to get serious.

Although the actual magical education was done through the various classes, most students already had some sort of background in magic, as (could be) seen through the technical portion of the entrance examination.

This was the basis for how classes were conducted, but even for students with a proper foundation in systemic education, those not adept in combat skills often felt that they could not keep up in class. From a certain perspective, the separation of Course 1 and 2 students was intended to prevent this feeling from negatively affecting the two groups — in other words, abandoning one side.

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"940 ms. You passed, Tatsuya-kun!"

"Finally... This is the third time already. Thank goodness it's over with."

Tatsuya smiled tiredly at Mizuki, who was excited for him as if she had done it herself.

Currently, Tatsuya's class was practicing technical skills in magic.

Today's lesson involved compiling a single Systematic magic, then activating the magic within the time limit in teams of two.

It involved reading the Activation Sequence, then basing what was read and using the Magic Computation Region in the Magician's subconsciousness to then construct the Magic Sequence and activate it.

This was the system for modern magic.

What happens in this Scheme — transforming the Activation Sequences, that could be recorded as numbers by machines, into a form of magic that machines could not create in reality, uses a process known in Information Engineering as "compiling". By quantifying the processes needed for magic invocation, transforming them into Activation Sequences, then using

Schemes to revert them back into Magic Sequences, modern magic improved in precision, stability, and variability.

The price was that they sacrificed the speed that comes from only using a few words in "Superpowers".

Since the complicated method for constructing Magic Sequences already exists, this was all that could be done.

However, while the time lag for constructing Magic Sequences could not be reduced to zero, it could be infinitely reduced to near zero.

There is a reason why modern magic emphasizes speed for constructing Magic Sequences.

Originally, CADs were only used as storage for recording Activation Sequence numbers, but they quickly became the method for accelerating Magic activation speed.

For the CADs used in today's class, because they had not been adjusted for individual differences, no additional speed boosting mechanisms were added. The purpose of this class was to use this factory condition CAD to undergo high speed compiling training.

If one member of the duo could not pass, then both students had to remain. Mizuki passed on her first try, but she let out an explosive sigh and patted her chest in comfort at Tatsuya.

"That's quite surprising. Tatsuya-kun really isn't good at technical skills..."

For today's topic, "Single Systematic Single Process" magic, from reading the Activation Sequence entirely to actually invoking the magic, an exceptional Magician would only need 500 ms.

For Tatsuya, who needed three tries to get under the 1000 ms time limit, even the kindest description could not approach exceptional.

"That's surprising... I thought I've said it quite a few times before?"

"It's true that I've heard it a few times... but I've always thought that was just being humble.

Because Tatsuya-kun looks like someone who can do anything, it's hard to believe that you're not fluent with technical skills."

Mizuki tilted her head and expressed her heartfelt amazement, to which Tatsuya could only smile wryly — not that there was any other option.

"...It might be a little ridiculous to say it myself, but if I had that level of technical skills, I wouldn't be in this class."

Tatsuya made sure to keep any loathing out of his tone and language. While he did not know how effective it was, Mizuki frankly nodded her head.

"That's true. If Tatsuya-kun were also capable in technical skills... That would give off an overly-perfect, unapproachable vibe."

As she said this, Mizuki expressed a carefree smile.

I wonder if I should smile along with her, Tatsuya thought.

"However, Tatsuya-kun... don't you feel, a little unsatisfied?"

"...Towards what?"

Mizuki bent her head, her expression unreadable. It was because of this that Tatsuya was confused as to how to respond to her.

"If you have the talent, but have been evaluated as having no talent, normally this would be quite galling.

If it were me, I wouldn't be surprised if I felt unsatisfied. If I had Tatsuya-kun's level of skill, I would be furious at being called a Weed... but Tatsuya-kun looks like he doesn't care..."

That was quite a difficult question to answer.

Taking Mizuki's personality into account, it was unlikely she would spread negative rumors or speak to others regarding this subject, but if he didn't give her an answer that she could accept, it was possible that she may dig deeper into his business.

"Execution speed is also a talent.

And it's a rather important factor as well.

There are situations where one second can mean the difference between life and death. So my evaluation of being unskilled is not incorrect."

If Mizuki were any other ordinary Course 2 student, this would have been an acceptable answer.

But,

"If this was an actual combat situation, Tatsuya-kun would have some way to improve invocation speed."

She was someone who possessed special "eyes".

"...What makes you think so?"

Even knowing that saying so indicated a confession this was true and that he was capitulating, his wavering brain could not think of a better response.

"In the technical portion earlier, each of Tatsuya-kun's three tries looked like you were forcing yourself.

Because my mother is a translator, I'll use this example: it's like someone able to use English to think and reply to an English question was forced to use Japanese to reply, and then translate it back into English.

From the start, Tatsuya-kun abandoned the complete Magic Sequence and started compiling again, right?

When looking at the time, reading the Activation Sequence occurs at the same time as constructing the Magic Sequence.

After seeing that, I thought that.

It can't be that, Tatsuya-kun, for magic of this level, you can construct Magic Sequences without looking at the Activation Sequence?"

To not use Activation Sequences, also known as skipping CADs altogether, and still use magic at the same speed. In regards to this technique, he had strict orders to keep this a secret.

However, it looked like someone saw through this after the first practice.

As if his brain had been plunged into cold water, he calmed down.

Despite his wariness being raised to the max and his faltering reaching a peak, these only served to restore him to normal.

For someone who rarely faltered to this extent, this was a good experience for Tatsuya.

"I didn't think that someone could see this far.

That's quite an impressive pair of eyes."

This time, it was Mizuki who turned pale. As expected, Mizuki was trying to hide the truth about her own "eyes".

That was a slightly evil way to say it as the corners of Tatsuya's mouth turned upwards. But from Mizuki's reaction, the chances that his own hidden skill set had been discovered had been drastically reduced.

In reality, Tatsuya had another idea. Since she already figured out that he had a technique that bypassed Activation Sequences to use magic, as long as she thought that it wasn't a personal skill but more of a Systematic one, then everything would be fine. So long as he could sate her sense of curiosity, she would have no further problems.

"It's true. For single systems, it's faster to directly construct the Magic Sequence.

This can only be used for magics with few processes. For me, five processes is my limit."

Processes in modern magic has two meanings: the steps that lead to magic invocation, and the components for magic used in phenomena rewriting.

The "five processes in magic" that Tatsuya mentioned here refers to when five magic executions combine to change something.

For example, in order to use magic to transfer an egg from the kitchen to the dining table, this requires four steps: Increase Speed (Acceleration), Movement, Reduce Speed (Reverse Acceleration), and Stop (end of movement).

Movement magic is a type of magic that changes an object's speed and path, so if the Increase Speed process was removed, this would cause the object to speed up without regard to inertia, most likely causing the egg to break up.

If the Movement process was removed and only relied on Increase and Reduce Speed to move the egg, the egg would shoot out in a linear fashion, thus necessitating complex deceleration to manipulate. Thus, even though another process was added, it's actually more simple to use a combination of Speed and Movement magics to manipulate movement.

In comparison, when using magic that blows away an opponent in anti-personnel combat, only one simple process would be enough. The intent is to cause harm to the enemy, so there's no need to reduce the impact incurred.

"I think that five processes would be sufficient for combat-related magic..."

Generally speaking, magic used by civilians required many more processes than combat magic.

Just as Mizuki said, magics that involved one to five processes covered over half of the known combat magics.

"That's because I didn't learn magic for combat reasons.

In order to quickly invoke magic with more processes, Activation Sequences are still a must, so I'm not unsatisfied with the fact that my lower technical skills have received the appropriate evaluation."

Tatsuya smiled as he said this, then noticed that for some reason Mizuki was staring at him with teary eyes.

Tatsuya suddenly felt that somewhere, somehow, an epic misunderstanding had occurred.

Immediately, the result caused by this misunderstanding was displayed before Tatsuya.

"That's amazing! Tatsuya-kun... you are truly worthy of my respect!"

With her hands in front of her chest, Mizuki's delirious voice said something that (for Tatsuya) could not be ignored after being heard.

"Ha?"

"For most people, they become Magicians simply because they can use magic... but, Tatsuya-kun has his own goals, so he learns magic for that reason..."

"Um, well, while that's true..."

"I, have been enlightened!"

"That..."

"Originally, I learned magic only because I wanted to control this pair of "eyes", and I never considered how to use magic, but from now on, I will seriously consider it!"

Uh? Didn't this woman want to hide her eyes in the first place? While Tatsuya was thinking this, Mizuki's awe inspiring spirit overwhelmed his urge to retort.

"Err, Mizuki-chan?"

"It's true. As long as you have a clear goal, you wouldn't retreat after encountering such feeble attacks.

As long as you can achieve your dream, school grades are merely accessories.

This should be what people pursue in life.

People need to endlessly chase their dreams..."

"My word, Mizuki, what are you so excited about?"

Mizuki's soliloquy — even while class was ongoing — continued until Erika's retort.

Finally noticing her classmates odd gazes (more like blank stares), Mizuki blushed as she dropped her head.

Seeing Mizuki like this, Tatsuya adopted a solemn expression to mask what he was feeling inside.

A person's hopes and dreams?

It wasn't something as beautiful as that.

From the beginning, he never had a chance at a life that was unrelated to magic.

He didn't become a Magician because he could use magic; he became a Magician precisely because he couldn't use magic.

For him, magic was a curse cast upon him the moment he was born.

Even if it was transformed into something that he could accept, to him, it was still a struggle.

That being said, if it was as simple as people becoming Magicians simply because they could use magic, then it was not surprising that the bottom feeders amongst Magicians would choose to deny magic.

Maybe he had the wrong idea.

— Tatsuya suddenly thought this way.

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It was time for lunch break.

In the end, even Tatsuya was persuaded to stay.

— Persuaded by Erika and Leo's begging.

"1060 ms... Good, keep it up. Just a little more."

"S-Still so far... I never knew that 0.1 seconds was such a far distance..."

"Idiot, you don't use 'far' to measure time. You're supposed to say 'long'."

"Erika-chan... 1052 ms."

"Ahhhhh!

Don't say it!

I just managed to start thinking positively!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"No, it's okay, Mizuki.

No matter how desperate reality is, we can't choose to escape from it. This, is our destiny..."

"...Your boring solo acts are none of my business, but it's about time to end this horseplay."

The combination of Erika and Leo could not maintain a friendly relationship for more than a second, even in class.

So they asked Tatsuya for guidance.

"I say, Leo, you're spending too much time aiming.

In this situation, there's no need for precision targeting."

"While I understand that..."

To Leo's lifeless response, Tatsuya nodded sympathetically.

"Well, that's true...

There's nothing for it, so you might as well use a little trick. Why don't you settle your aim before reading the Activation Sequence?"

"Uh? Is that legal?"

"That's why it's a trick. There's no benefit to technical expertise, but in this situation it's probably the last idea I can think of, not that I wanted to tell you in the first place..."

"What! Please, Tatsuya! I don't care if it's a masterstroke or a cheat, if it can get me through this, teach it to me!"

As he watched Leo begging with both hands clasped above his head, Tatsuya let out a deep sigh.

"Don't say it like that. It's not like we're cheating or anything.

...Really, I already said that I'm not adept with technical skills. If you need pointers, why not ask an expert?"

"Even if you're not adept, you're still better than me, right?

Also, you are the only one who knows the compiling combination and is able to point out any errors."

"I'll teach you even without the flattery...

Next, it's Erika's turn."

"What, what? I don't care if it's a masterstroke or cheating or whatever, just give it to me!

I'm starving over here."

"I see, so it sounds even worse when the two of you are begging together.

Ah~ For Erika... I can't understand where your problem is exactly."

"Eh?"

"To be precise, I don't understand why you made these mistakes.

You should be far better at compiling than I am."

"How can this be?! Tatsuya-kun, don't abandon me!"

As he looked at the teary-eyed — with some parts acting mixed in — Erika with her hands tightly clasped as if in prayer, Tatsuya sighed again.

These two are practically mirror images of one another, Tatsuya thought, but did not say it aloud.

"Got it, Erika. When you're reading the Activation Sequence, put your right hand over your left on the board."

"Eh?"

Upon hearing this, not just Erika, but Mizuki was also confused.

"...Is that all there is to it?"

"I'm not completely certain. As for the reason, I'll explain it if it works."

"Oh, hm... let me try."

Erika temporarily set aside her doubt and turned towards the internally installed CAD.

Seeing this, Tatsuya started tutoring Leo.

After the flash of Psion light dissipated, a set of numbers about the size of a large ball appeared above. This was the highest pressure calculated through the casting of single system weight magic. The timer began (stopped?) only after the calculated number exceeded the base limit for pressure.

"1010 ms.

Erika-chan, you improved by 40 ms in one try!

You've only got a little more left to go."

"Yes!

It feels like I've got my motivation back!"

"1016. Don't hesitate, Leo. You already know the target location. There's no need to visually check the target each time."

"I-I understand.

Okay, I'll get it this time!"

Tatsuya and Mizuki went to reset the recording devices while Erika and Leo closed their eyes or waved their arms, using a variety of methods to keep up their morale.

At this moment, a nervous voice floated in from behind Tatsuya's back.

"Onii-sama, are you busy...?"

The owner of the voice was his own sister, and there was no need to turn around to verify this.

Erika heard footsteps that belonged to more than one person and turned around.

"Miyuki... Along with Mitsui-chan and Kitayama-chan?"

"Erika, don't get distracted.

Sorry, Miyuki. We're almost done. Just give us a second."

"Eh?"

"I understand. I'm terribly sorry, Onii-sama."

Miyuki smiled pleasantly and bowed at Tatsuya's apologetic voice.

Feeling as if the pressure had been multiplied many fold for some unknown reason, Leo furrowed his brows.

The other two followed Miyuki out the doorway.

Seeing this, Tatsuya nodded.

"Okay, you two, this is it."

Although the voice wasn't loud, it seemed to stifle any objection.

"Yeah!"

"Okay, let's finish this!"

Their morale at a peak, both of them glanced at the CAD display.

"We made it~"

Erika's cheer turned into the bell that finally announced the end of the class.

"Whew... Danke [1], Tatsuya."

Tatsuya raised a hand to acknowledge Leo's thanks, then waved Miyuki in.

Her face flushed with happiness, Miyuki walked towards him.

In comparison, Miyuki's classmates were more reserved — Mitsui Honoka and Kitayama Shizuku stepped forward with slight smiles on their faces.

"Excellent work, you two.

Onii-sama, I've brought the goods as you instructed... Is this enough?"

Because he was just speaking with Erika and Leo, Tatsuya shook his head at Miyuki's question.

"No, but there's not much time left anyway, so this is perfect. Good work, Miyuki. Mitsui-san and Kitayama-san as well, thank you for lending a hand. I appreciate it."

Even though they had spoken previously, these two were only Miyuki's acquaintances, so in Tatsuya's eyes, they weren't completely friends yet. Thus, his tone was overly formal.

"No! It's nothing at all!"

"Don't worry about it. Despite looking like this, I'm actually quite strong."

Towards Honoka's unexpectedly excited answer and Shizuku's seemingly joking response, Tatsuya once again expressed his thanks and relieved them of their plastic bags.

"Catch."

And tossed the items for Erika and Leo to catch, just like that.

"What is it?"

"Sandwiches...?"

The bags contained sandwiches and drinks sold in the school cafeteria.

"If we headed for the cafeteria now, we wouldn't make it in time for the afternoon class."

As he said this, Tatsuya took his prepared bento from Miyuki.

"Thank you~ I'm starving."

"Tatsuya, you're the best!"

Smiling wryly at his food-obsessed friends, Tatsuya also took a seat in a nearby chair. At this time, Mizuki's unwary voice drifted to his ears.

"...But, is this okay? Aren't we prohibited from eating in the classrooms?"

"Food is only banned in areas with data terminals.

The school rules don't prohibit eating in classrooms."

"Eh, is that so?"

"Hm, you would know this if you seriously read the school rules. I used to think it was prohibited too, so I was a little surprised," Tatsuya replied, as he pulled out a pair of chopsticks.

Mizuki said "In that case", and reached out a hand.

Leo unwrapped the sandwich and took a deep bite.

"You didn't care from the beginning."

Erika retorted as she savored the exquisitely made sandwich.

A peaceful table... was actually replaced by several chairs because there was no table as Tatsuya and company started their tardy lunch break.

Miyuki and Team Appreciation also joined in with their drinks.

"Miyuki-chan, did you already finish eating?"

"Yes. Onii-sama said to come over after eating."

At Mizuki's concerned question, Miyuki replied with this.

"Eh, I'm a little surprised. I thought Miyuki would say "I won't begin unless Onii-sama picks up his chopsticks!" or something like that."

Erika's comment was accompanied by full blown laughter rather than mere giggling.

From her expression, it was clear that she was purely joking. No one present gave it a serious thought.

—Except for one person.

"Ah, that's exactly right, Erika.

Normally that would be the case, but today was because of Onii-sama's orders.

Of course, I would never do something on my own that would go against Onii-sama."

"...'Normally' she would..."

"Yep."

"...'Of course'... Eh?"

"Hm, yes?"

A cramp developed in Erika's smile as she watched Miyuki earnestly shake her head. The mood suddenly turned very heavy.

As if seeking to dispel this strange atmosphere, Mizuki spoke up at an unnaturally high volume.

"Miyuki-chan's class is also starting in technical practice, right? What's it like?"

Honoka and Shizuku glanced at one another.

It was a pair of concerned expressions.

Without paying heed to her peers' attitudes, Miyuki took the straw away from her mouth as she replied.

"It should be the same as your class, Mizuki. Using a slow machine and tasked with a boring practice like calculation."

The five people apart from Tatsuya revealed shocked expressions.

Her fierce, serpent-like tongue was completely incompatible with her lady-like demeanor.

"You appear very displeased."

"Of course I'm displeased. That kind of exercise is only good for practicing alone."

At her elder brother's teasing words, Miyuki replied in a huff, but her voice was tinged with a flirtatious tone.

"Hm... Even teaching hand over hand is bound to have some good and some bad."

"I admit I'm being treated differently. I'm terribly sorry if I've upset Erika because of this."

"No, I don't mind at all."

At Miyuki's honest apology, Erika lightly waved her hand.

"It's only natural to try and find the students with potential. It's the same with the dojo that my family runs — those that have no potential are set aside and forgotten."

"Erika-chan's house is a dojo?"

"A little bit of ancient style kenjutsu, although that's just the side job."

"Ah, that's why..." Mizuki nodded as if she understood something.

She was probably thinking of the time when Erika used a retractable rod to disarm Morisaki's CAD.

"Chiba-san... Thinks that's only natural?" This time, it was Honoka who interjected with trepidation.

"Erika is fine. Actually, please call me that."

"Why are you putting on airs like someone important..." Leo's amazed retort created a perfect buffering moment for Honoka.

"Then, Erika, please call me Honoka."

"Okay, okay.

That being said, when you said natural, are you referring to when Course 1 students are supervised by teachers, and Course 2 students can't catch up?"

"...Yeah, that."

Honoka hesitated, then nodded.

"If it's that, then of course."

Erika nodded without any hesitation whatsoever.

"Because it's a matter of course, Miyuki and Honoka don't need to be troubled about it?"

"...You're quite calm about it." Leo replied in response to Erika's declaration.

"Ah? Is Leo-kun the one who is unsatisfied with the situation?"

"No, I just feel that there's nothing I can do about it..."

Leo's voice was comparatively lackluster.

"I see~.

I don't think that 'there's nothing I can do', I think that 'it's a matter of fact' instead."

Erika's tone was relaxed as she said this.

"May I ask your reasoning behind this?"

At Honoka's question, Erika tilted her head.

After a short period of silence to collect her thoughts, with her index finger pressed against her temple, she began her reply.

"Hm... Because I've always thought that it's so natural up to this point, so it's hard to explain...

For example, in our dojo, the earliest we would teach any techniques to the students would be at least 6 months after enrollment."

"Oh."

Tatsuya nodded his head with interest.

Question marks floated above the heads of Honoka, Shizuku, and Mizuki.

"In the beginning, the only thing we teach is footwork and practice swings. After we demonstrate once, the rest is up to individual practice.

Afterwards, we start teaching those that look like they've grasped the proper manner of swinging."

"...Then, wouldn't there be students that never improve no matter how much time has passed...?"

"Yes, that has happened."

Erika nodded in response to Honoka's question.

"Next, those people have to relentlessly practice.

Second, if your physical body isn't suited for waving a sword, then it would be a waste of time to impart any strong techniques anyways."

"Ah..." Mizuki quietly gasped.

As she watched Mizuki, Erika continued to speak.

"Because of this, the only thing you can do is keep practicing your swings. Watch what other people do, and carve it into your memory.

That is because you're surrounded by specialists of the sword.

You're just wasting your time idling if you wait for someone to teach you.

Only the utterly naive would believe that they could receive lessons from the start.

Whether it's the Sensei or assistants, remember that everyone there is someone currently in training.

Everyone has their own personal training regimen.

Those that cannot learn from the people around them and solely rely on being taught, are utterly delusional."

After she finished speaking, her eyes took on a tempting glint.

As he watched Erika become more animated during speaking to the point of lecturing, Tatsuya felt his spirit soar a bit.

"...Even though your words were pretty badass, didn't you and I need Tatsuya to teach us just now...?"

"Ouch!

It hurts when you say that."

Erika furrowed her brows at Leo's point, but her relaxed voice didn't change.

"Those are two different things, apples and oranges... Although there have been situations where the tutor and the tutored were of different levels, which usually ends in disaster.

Actually, a real disaster would be where the one being tutored was at a higher level than the tutor."

Tatsuya revealed an evil smirk.

"Alas, I guess today qualifies as a true catastrophe then.

Erika's final record was faster than mine by 100 ms."

Erika was suddenly covered in cold sweat.

"Uh, no, what I wanted to say wasn't that...

S-Speaking of which, I still don't understand!

Why did overlapping the hands improve my time by so much?"

Forcibly changing the subject.

Everyone knew she was trying to muddy the waters, but if anyone asked too closely then it would be troublesome, so Tatsuya shrewdly let it slide.

"Nothing much. It's actually quite simple. Erika is used to holding the CAD with one hand."

"Uh?" Although Tatsuya's "explanation" had just started, Erika already interrupted the proceedings with more questions.

"How did you know?" was written clearly all over Erika's face, but for Tatsuya, this was something that was immediately discernible. After their conflict with Morisaki Shun and taking into account the shape of the CAD, this was a simple result to arrive at. Ignoring Erika's exaggerated reaction, Tatsuya continued "explaining".

"So I thought, if she put both hands on the CAD board in the classroom, it might be difficult for her to use."

"So that's why you told her to cover one hand with the other, creating a single handed grip..."

Mizuki nodded her head in amazement. She was not the only one with that expression on her face.

"Even though there were some posture problems gripping it with one hand, that didn't matter once she became motivated to grasp it with both hands, meaning the difficulty she encountered was simply a mental block."

"...So that's why. It looks like Tatsuya-kun can see right through me."

Erika could not resist a wry smile, causing everyone to burst into laughter.

"It feels like I've lost all my energy...

By the way, did Class A use the same CAD?"

"Yes."

Miyuki did not hide her disgust as she nodded, prompting Erika's curiosity.

"Just for reference, could you tell me how long you took?"

"Eh? Me?"

Miyuki's eyes widened as she pointed at herself and Erika intentionally nodded in an exaggerated motion.

Miyuki glanced at Tatsuya.

"Go ahead." Tatsuya nodded with a wry smile.

"If Onii-sama says so..."

Miyuki hesitated, then agreed.

Mizuki, who was closest to the machines, started setting the measuring equipment.

As if she were preparing to play the piano, Miyuki lightly placed her fingers on the board.

Measurement, start.

The remaining psion light flashed across.

Mizuki's face froze.

Losing patience at her friend who wasn't announcing the result, Erika urged her on.

"...235 ms..."

"Uh...?"

"That's insane..."

Their stiff expressions started to spread.

"No matter how many times I hear it, it's still an astounding score..."

"Miyuki's technical abilities are nearing the limit for human reaction speeds."

Even the Class A students could not help but sigh.

Only her elder brother didn't seem surprised.

He even looked somewhat disappointed as he wrinkled his brow.

"The old models used for education can only do so much. There's nothing you can do, Miyuki."

"There's no other choice, I have to use these maladjusted Activation Sequence filled with background noise... It's really irritating.

As expected, my real strength can only be revealed by the CADs maintained by Onii-sama himself."

Halfway between throwing a tantrum and being coquettish, Miyuki lay her head against Tatsuya's side. Tatsuya gently patted her head like he was comforting a child.

Everyone who was watching this scene did not tease them like they usually would.

The siblings' strength and words were displayed before their very eyes.

Before the difference displayed by the pair, jealousy was something only idiots would feel.

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After school, Tatsuya sat in the cafe and stared blankly at the passing students.

The mixed atmosphere in the room was likely the reason why the majority of the students frequented this place.

According to Mari, the cafe saw the highest amount of traffic shortly after the school term began.

After students familiarized themselves with the campus, they begin to seek out places like club rooms, the central quad, or empty classrooms to spend their spare time.

Well, since the cafe wasn't for profit anyways, the loss in traffic was not a major concern.

The coffee atop the table had already turned cold.

The situation was the exact reverse of their previous meeting.

The only detail that was the same was that someone invited the other person.

Tatsuya was waiting for Sayaka in order to hear the results of her "homework".

Although he was irritated by the spying gaze looking at him, Tatsuya did not make any distinctive motions. Although he was confident that he could detect the target no matter how hard they hid, publicly subduing the target in the middle of the cafe was inadvisable, so he chose to avoid any violent action and merely pretend to calmly wait without detecting anything.

Fifteen minutes after the arranged time.

She finally appeared.

"I'm sorry! Did you wait very long?"

"No worries, I got your message anyways."

That wasn't merely just being polite.

Tatsuya's terminal did receive Sayaka's message saying that she would be about ten minutes late.

Also, by the time he received the message, it was only five minutes before the appointed time. Since it wasn't as if there was a major change in the arrangement, no matter if it was ten or twenty minutes, it was only waiting. The fact that he thought this way was probably because he had considerable patience.

"Is that so? Thank goodness.

I was just thinking what I was going to do if Shiba-kun left."

Sayaka patted her chest in an exaggerated fashion.

Looked like today was also the "cute girl" type.

Tatsuya tilted his head and thought, in her mind, exactly what was supposed to draw his interest?

"What is it?"

Sayaka was befuddled.

Looks like he accidentally expressed his mental thoughts.

"It's nothing. Just that when senpai turns into a 'cute girl', this image greatly differs from the time you're holding a sword."

"Really, you meanie... Stop picking on me."

She frantically looked elsewhere.

Tatsuya was unable to determine whether this was her honest reaction or more acting on her part.

Unfortunately, the results were announced before he could arrive at any conclusion.

"I'm sorry."

He smiled in apology.

This was his acting.

Even though he didn't have too much confidence in it, that is.

"Really... Is Tatsuya's real personality that of a flirt?"

"And not of a Magician, at least, not yet."

Taking a sip of cold coffee, Tatsuya turned around. He wasn't avoiding Sayaka's gaze, but instead, was looking towards the silhouette hidden amongst the plants.

"Watanabe-senpai..."

Sayaka sucked in a breath and noticed that figure. But her sound was very light and insufficient to travel to that person.

"Oh, Tatsuya-kun."

The first one to respond was Mari. However, it was obvious that her gaze was reprimanding Tatsuya. If he had not specifically directed his gaze over, then she could have approached without drawing notice — since this was the only way she could have erased her own presence.

"I'm not being lazy here."

Mari forced a smile at Tatsuya's reply. It was hard to tell whether Tatsuya's line meant "he was off duty today" or purely a joke.

"Don't worry, it's not like I'm reminding you as a committee member since I'm just passing through."

Now that Tatsuya mentioned it this way, Mari's appearance would seem unnatural. Mari, who did not miss this opportunity to cover this, was quite suave about this as well.

"I apologize if I was bothering the two of you. Mibu, sorry."

"No, it's nothing like that..."

Sayaka's reply to Mari was slightly stiff. Was it because she was nervous responding to an upperclassman, or because of negative feelings towards the Public Moral Committee.

Tatsuya felt that (n)either one was incorrect.

This impression was only strengthened by the powerful gaze Sayaka directed at Mari's retreating figure.

"So regarding what we talked about last time..."

After Mari's silhouette left the cafe, Sayaka finally started talking about the main subject.

Tatsuya was thinking about "Didn't she say that it's in my hands now..." or "She specifically came to observe because..." and "Monitoring would be another thing altogether", but he did not mention them aloud.

"In the beginning, merely expressing our ideas to the school was sufficient."

Her arm shook as she clasped her hands into fists beneath the table.

"But, as expected, just this is not enough.

We want the school to improve the way we are treated."

She's in quite deep, Tatsuya thought.

Was she earnest? Or just saying so because he perked her interest?

If this created a ruckus, it may lead to the reverse effect.

"In terms of improvement, do you have any concrete changes in mind?"

"That is... Everything in terms of treatment."

"Everything, like actual lessons?"

"...That's also one of them."

"The primary difference between Course 1 and 2 would be the presence of instructors, so is senpai suggesting the school increase the number of faculty members?"

Such a thing was impossible.

Originally, the policy was created precisely because there weren't enough people capable of effectively using magic.

The Course 2 system was a necessary evil to help ensure the number of Magicians and Magic Artificers.

"I didn't plan on taking it so far..."

As expected, the returning comment was a lackluster denial.

"Then, are you referring to club activities?

I recall that the Kendo and Kenjutsu clubs have equal access and privileges to the gymnasium?"

According to Tatsuya's investigation yesterday, the surprising result was that the Kendo and Kenjutsu clubs had an equal amount of days in the gym.

"Or, is it problems with the budget?

While it is true that clubs affiliated with magic contests receive a higher amount of funding, based on the results of the budget division, this is something commonly seen in normal high schools as well."

"That... Maybe that is...

Then, Shiba-kun doesn't feel dissatisfied?

Asides from magic technical skills, no matter if it's magic theory, ordinary subjects, physical capabilities, or actual combat ability, even if you surpass the Course 1 students in all of these areas, but are labeled a Weed solely on your poor technical score, are you truly able to resign yourself to that?"

As he watched Sayaka desperately trying to find words to shore up her argument, Tatsuya felt that he was too harsh.

His resignation and regret were completely unrelated to her thoughts.

If you want to change, why don't you use your own thoughts to persuade others?

"Of course I'm not resigned."

Then he should,

"In that case!"

"However, I have no reason to change the school."

Speak of his own thoughts.

"What?"

"I do not have that many expectations on this state-sponsored school."

These were his true thoughts, without a single hint of hypocrisy.

"The only things I want are access to the undisclosed data files stored within the magic universities and related organizations and to graduate from magic high school. Beyond that, I have no further desires."

Sayaka was dumbfounded at Tatsuya's retaliatory response.

"Not to mention that I have no intention of putting the blame for 'using banned words on campus to hurt others' or the immaturity of our peers on the school itself."

From the surface, this comment appearred to critique the incorrect ideology leading Course 1 students to refer to Course 2 students as "Weeds", but in reality, this was a reprimand aimed at those who could not meet their own expectations and sought the easy way out by blaming others for their weakness. Tatsuya let Sayaka clearly understand that.

"Alas, it looks like senpai and I have fundamentally different ideologies."

After saying this, Tatsuya rose from his seat.

"Wait... Wait a minute!"

He turned around and glanced at the still sitting — or maybe, unable to stand — Sayaka, whose face had lost all color, whose eyes searched for support, and raised her head to look at him.

This was definitely not a glare, but an earnest, desperate gaze.

"How... can you be so calm?

What is it that supports Shiba-kun?"

"My dream is to develop a Gravity Control-Type Thermonuclear Fusion Reactor.

Learning magic is nothing more than a single stepping stone along the way."

Sayaka's face turned blank.

Most likely, she was utterly unable to comprehend Tatsuya's words.

The realization of a Gravity Control-Type Thermonuclear Reactor, along with the "actualization of Generalized Flying-Type Magic", and the "development of a perpetual motion device based on the model of unlimited inertial expansion" are known collectively as the "Three Great Puzzles of Weight Systematic Magic."

For the future goal of a Course 2 student, this was simply too grandiose of a concept.

Tatsuya did not anticipate a mutual understanding, so he said nothing.

He no longer paid any attention to Sayaka and, once again, turned and left.

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A week of peace and quiet passed by.

As he went on patrol as a Public Moral Committee member, he no longer encountered the ambushes that cropped up during the recruitment week. It was a peaceful time, just as Mizuki predicted (?).

Finally, Tatsuya obtained a stable high school life — at least, that was how it looked from the surface.

This was nothing more than the calm before the storm.

One day after class.

At this time, students that participated in clubs were heading for the storage compartments to retrieve their uniforms and store their other school equipment, while those that were heading home prepared to leisurely depart.

"Attention, fellow students!"

A roar came across the loudspeakers.

"What the hell is going on!"

"Dude, relax. You're annoying enough as it is, don't start yelling too."

"....I think Erika-chan needs to calm down too."

Just when many students were milling about in confusion,

"—Apologies, fellow students!"

The same speech started again from the loudspeakers.

"They probably messed up on the volume the first time."

"No, I'm pretty sure now's not the time to comment on that."

Erika's keen ears picked up on Tatsuya's soft muttering, and immediately retorted.

Erika-chan is the same too, Mizuki thought, but did not verbalize.

"We are, the Aspirants Alliance who wish to abolish the differences within the school."

"Aspirants..."

Tatsuya softly repeated the words he heard delivered by a masculine voice over the loudspeakers. Based on the conversation in the cafe last week, this broadcast was most likely what Sayaka referred to as "an attempt to improve treatment". However, was there a precedent where members of a political club or organization labeled themselves as "aspirants", Tatsuya's thoughts unintentionally went on a tangent.

"Towards the Student Council and Club Management Group, we demand to negotiate on an even footing."

"I say, don't you need to be somewhere?"

Although she didn't hear his unpleasant mumbling, Erika's exuberant voice nagged at the still seated Tatsuya who was staring at the loudspeaker.

"That's true."

While Erika's attitude was, in a way, prudent, Tatsuya didn't say anything because what she said was correct.

"Inappropriate use of the Public Announcement Room is without question.

There should be committee members on their way there right now."

Just as Tatsuya said this, a message arrived at the personal terminal he carried in his pocket, and not the data terminal in the classroom.

"Heh, speak of the devil. Then, I'm off."

"Ah, yes, please be careful."

Mizuki rose from her chair and spoke to Tatsuya in a voice filled with unease. Suddenly mindful of his surroundings, Tatsuya took a cursory look around the class. While there were students both in and out of their chairs, very few of them opted to leave the classroom. There were very few students who found the situation interesting like Erika, or, were infected by Leo's curiosity. The majority of the students wore expressions of restlessness and were contemplating if it was appropriate to leave.

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"Ah, Onii-sama."

"Miyuki, you've been summoned as well?"

"Yes, the President said to meet in front of the Public Announcement Room."

Tatsuya met up with Miyuki along the way, and headed towards the Public Announcement Room.

However, their pace was not particularly fast.

"Is this Blanche's work?"

"Not sure if it's the organization itself, but it matches their modus operandi."

The two of them continued their conversation until they reached the door to the Public Announcement Room together.

Before the doorway, Mari, Katsuto, Suzune, and members of the Public Moral Committee and Club Management Group could be seen.

"You're late."

"My apologies."

Both sides went through the motions for reprimanding and apologies, then started to verify the current situation.

The broadcast was probably curtailed by cutting the power.

Given that they hadn't charged in, the door was likely locked. It appeared that their opponents somehow managed to obtain the Master Key.

"Isn't this blatant criminal activity?"

Using the ends to justify the means, this type of thinking clearly showed that these guys were model "activists".

"Just so.

Thus, we have to be prudent here, so we don't force them into doing something drastic."

Although Tatsuya was speaking to himself, Suzune still replied.

"Even if we approach this prudently, there's no guarantee that they will back down.

I believe that we should take the rougher approach, with the intent of ending this as soon as possible."

Immediately, Mari interrupted.

It looks like we're deadlocked by two competing approaches.

For crisis management, this is the worst possible situation.

"What does Club Leader Juumonji think?"

Tatsuya's question drew quite a few surprised looks.

Tatsuya himself felt that this question did bring a "who're you to ask questions" feeling, but even then, this was preferable to remaining at an impasse.

It's not like he was an adult.

And he didn't plan on asking adults for assistance in this matter.

"I believe that there's no harm in agreeing to their demands to negotiate.

This is only a more radical attempt at what we've seen in the past. As long as we calmly refute their claims, we should be able to quell this without further concerns."

"So, we just sit here and wait?"

"There's not enough information to make a call at this point.

Although we can't just ignore illegal activity, on the other hand, unless this is a dire condition, damaging school facilities is also a criminal activity.

We've petitioned the faculty to use the security system override to open the door, but they've refused."

In other words, they didn't want to forcibly end the issue.

Katsuto's idea ended up paralleling Suzune's proposal.

In that case, there's nothing else they could do except stay there and wait.

At Tatsuya, who saluted briefly before backing away, Mari directed a displeased gaze.

While he was not coerced into action by this gaze, he still took out the portable terminal from his pocket and changed it to calling mode.

The circumstances forced them to wait, but just waiting in perpetuity was no solution.

After five attempts...

"Is this Mibu-senpai? This is Shiba."

Whoosh, quite a few looks turned this way.

"...So, where are you senpai?"

The number of gazes directed towards Tatsuya increased.

"Ah, so you're in the Public Announcement Room, that's quite... Thank you for your hard work."

Next, Tatsuya furrowed his brows, because a large sound that defied any attempts towards volume control came across the speaker.

Because the voice from the other side was almost entirely covered from the other listeners, they could only guess at the conversation.

"No, I'm not treating senpai like a fool.

Senpai as well, can you please stay calm about the situation... Ah, I'm sorry.

Then, shall we cut to the chase?"

Mari and Suzune, as well as a few others, perked up their ears in order to catch every one of Tatsuya's words.

"Club Leader Juumonji has agreed to negotiate.

As for the opinion of the Student Council President, we haven't confirmed... no, the President has also agreed."

Seeing Suzune's hand signal, Tatsuya immediately made the correction.

"Speaking of which, I would like to first discuss the negotiation site. Details like date and time... Hm, now. Before the school intercedes... No, I will guarantee senpai's freedom. We're not the police, so we have no authority to confine students... Then, that's all."

Tatsuya pulled out the earplugs and replaced the portable terminal into his pocket before turning to Mari.

"Looks like they're going to come out right away."

"Was that Mibu Sayaka just now?"

"Yeah. Earlier, she passed me her personal number to set up a meeting, not guessing that it would come in handy in this situation."

Behind Tatsuya, Miyuki dipped her head slowly. Although it wasn't obvious enough to make anyone think it as unnatural, but Tatsuya immediately understood that his sister was using her long hair to cover her facial expression.

"You do move quickly, do you..."

"You misunderstand."

Tatsuya couldn't tell if Mari's words were going to end in fortune or misfortune. At any rate, Miyuki wasn't someone who couldn't read the mood and would immediately attack Tatsuya's back in a fit of jealousy.

"Compared to that, I think we should prepare a bit."

Tatsuya didn't turn around (to Miyuki), but focused his attention on urging Mari, Suzune, and Katsuto to action.

"Prepare?"

What are you talking about? Mari used this expression to look at Tatsuya.

What are you asking about? Tatsuya blankly stared back at Mari.

"I am, of course, alluding to preparations to arrest all the occupants inside.

Given that they managed to steal the keys, it is well within reason that they are also equipped with CADs or other weapons."

"...I say, didn't you say you would guarantee their freedom?"

"I said I would guarantee the freedom of one, Mibu-senpai.

Also, I never mentioned that I was negotiating on behalf of the Public Moral Committee."

Not just Mari, but even Suzune and Katsuto were astounded at Tatsuya's words.

Naturally, there was one exception who lightly scolded Tatsuya.

"Onii-sama, you're evil."

"It's a little too late to say that, Miyuki."

"Ho ho, that's true."

However, Miyuki's scolding was delivered with a delighted tone.

"That being said, Onii-sama? Regarding the fact that you specifically saved Mibu-senpai's personal number to your terminal, it's still not too late now for you to tell me every last detail, is it?"

Her face illuminated with by her smile, Miyuki's pleased voice added this onto the end.

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"What is the meaning of this?!"

Whether it was just as expected or only a matter of course, Tatsuya was being interrogated by Sayaka.

Including her, there were five people that had taken control of the Public Announcement Room.

As Tatsuya surmised, they all had CADs, but did not prepare any firearms or blades.

From Tatsuya's point of view, despite their determination, the fact that none of them even considered he could be lying, thus ultimately causing them to be treated like amateur wannabes, was a foregone result.

Aside from Sayaka, the four others were all arrested by Public Moral Committee members while she was relieved of her CAD.

This was because Mari took Tatsuya's reputation into account.

Even though Tatsuya himself felt that verbal agreements were hardly binding in the first place.

Sayaka reached out to grab Tatsuya's collar, but her wrists were intercepted by Tatsuya's hands.

After easily countering the hands that were directed towards his collar, Tatsuya blankly watched Sayaka vent her feelings.

"How dare you lie to us!"

Watching the furiously struggling Sayaka, Tatsuya simply relaxed his hands.

Behind Sayaka, who was menacingly approaching Tatsuya, a voice called out.

"Shiba did not lie to you."

Sayaka flinched at the heavy, forceful voice.

"Club Leader Juumonji..."

"I have heard your demands. I have agreed to negotiate.

However, listening to your petition and agreeing with your methods, are two different things."

Sayaka's fighting spirit disappeared.

In front of one responsible for managing all extracurricular activities, Katsuto, and his resolve, Sayaka could only swallow her resentment.

"While that's the case, can't we just release them?"

But at the same time, accompanying the above comment, a petite figure imposed herself between Tatsuya and Sayaka.

Her back was to Tatsuya as if to protect him.

"Saegusa?"

Katsuto asked in astonishment.

"However, Mayumi."

Mari disagreed.

Nonetheless, Mayumi cut right through them.

"I understand what you're trying to say, Mari.

But, if we're only speaking to Mibu-san alone, there's no way we can negotiate.

As long as they're still students of the school, there should be no chance that they would run away."

"We definitely won't run!"

At Mayumi's words, Sayaka reflexively responded back.

"I've already spoken with the supervising teachers.

The Student Council will take responsibility for the theft of the keys as well as the unauthorized use of the loudspeakers."

Mayumi lightly sketched out the reason for her tardiness as well as their current situation.

Despite this, Sayaka and her companions did not betray a trace of fear, though if anyone were to weigh the pros and cons, they would come out vastly ahead, Tatsuya thought.

"Mibu-san, regarding the topics that we will be negotiating about, I would like to speak with you in private. Could you follow me, please?"

"...Yeah, no problem."

"Juumonji-kun, I'll take my leave."

"I understand."

"Sorry, Mari, I somehow feel that I stole your thunder."

"Mentally, no, I never felt that way. But in reality, this is how it's supposed to be,

So don't worry about it."

"That's great.

Then, Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki, the two of you can go home now."

"...Then, President, we'll take our leave."

After a short period of time.

The first one to recover was Miyuki.

Following his sister's solemn bow, Tatsuya wordlessly bowed, then left the scene.

Chapter 9

The next day, Tatsuya and Miyuki left the house a little earlier than usual.

Rather than to get to school earlier, they wanted to arrive earlier at the train station.

Luckily, they didn't need to wait for very long at the train station.

"Good morning, President."

Amongst women, Mayumi's figure would definitely be rated as petite, but that did not mean she would be buried within the crowds. Even in a crowd, her unique aura enabled Tatsuya to locate her immediately.

"Tatsuya-kun? And Miyuki too. What is it?"

Although the situation was obvious, Mayumi was completely blindsided by the possibility of meeting the two of them here, so her attitude did not reflect her usual joking nature and was a more normal reaction.

However, today's purpose was not to surprise Mayumi. Tatsuya skipped the preamble and dived right into the heart of the matter.

"I'm very concerned about what happened yesterday after we left. Can you tell me the results of the conversation between President and Mibu-senpai?"

At Tatsuya's request, Mayumi's eyes widened in shock.

"How astounding."

It was not just her expression, but her tone was filled with astonishment as well.

"Tatsuya-kun definitely doesn't seem like the type to care about other people's business."

"If it was only other people's business, I couldn't care less. Unfortunately, the fates have decreed otherwise."

"No wonder."

At Tatsuya's response, Mayumi nodded in acceptance. Tatsuya was already involved in the business with the "Activists Alliance". Even if he wanted to keep himself clear of the mess, it was already far beyond the point of no return.

He definitely possessed the right to know what was to come, Mayumi thought — even if this wasn't the case, the results would be announced tomorrow morning anyway.

"They asked that Course 1 and 2 students receive equal treatment, but it appears that they never considered how to put this into practice. To be precise, it feels like they want the Student Council to come up with the concrete details. Well, thanks to that, it's more like a Q&A session now. Originally, we only planned to discuss the negotiation details yesterday, but we ended up with a public forum that will be held in the auditorium tomorrow after school."

"Developments are happening at a breakneck pace..."

Tatsuya expressed a dull surprise, since to him this was an inevitable "Is it finally here?" Thus, he wasn't overly surprised. Tatsuya originally thought that the most effective strategy was to directly confront the members and drag them out to be dealt with, even at the expense of letting some remnants slip through the cracks. That being said, his reaction was probably in the decisive minority. For example, even Miyuki was in a daze at how quickly things were moving along.

"While I understand that strategy gives the opponent little time to prepare, this way, we're also in the same predicament. Who is going to represent the Student Council in the forum?"

At Tatsuya's question, Mayumi revealed a smile that clearly said "Good question", and pointed to herself.

"...So, it's just going to be the President alone?"

Tatsuya's voice was still skeptical, not to mention Miyuki's stunned silence.

"Although Hanzo-kun will also be onstage, I will be the only one speaking. Just as Tatsuya-kun said, there's no time to prepare, so if only one person is speaking, there shouldn't be any concerns about stepping on one another's toes. I'm also worried about leaving an overly belligerent impression."

"In other words, you definitely won't lose in a traditional debate?"

As Tatsuya said this, Mayumi confidently nodded her head.

"There's another thing," Mayumi's light voice was tinged with an air of expectation.

"If they truly possess the ability to overcome my arguments, wouldn't it be wonderful for them to pass it onto the school as well?"

In Tatsuya's ears, Mayumi seemed to be hoping that they'd demolish her side.

◊ ◊ ◊

At the announcement that a completely unprecedented forum was going to be held tomorrow, the Alliance (short for "Activists Alliance for the Abolishment of School-wide Differential Treatment") suddenly came alive with activity.

While it was unfair to say that many factions were involved, it was true that the sight of Alliance members actively stumping for supporters could be seen around campus before, during, and after class.

Every one of them wore the white bracelet with green and red stripes. Had they given up on hiding? Or were they unaware of the meaning behind the emblem...? Tatsuya believed it was the latter. Of course, Tatsuya did not support the idea that "the ignorant are not responsible for their crimes". He believed that responsibility was not measured by awareness, but by actions instead.

Despite that, he did not plan on interfering with the Alliance. Trying to gather the highest number of supporters before the "negotiation" was a natural course of action. While he wasn't unaffiliated with the situation, he wanted nothing to do with emotionally immature high school students that could be easily provoked by passionate words into actions that would hurtle them into the bottomless abyss (decisions that were wrong on multiple levels).

On the other hand, if the situation involved people he knew — Tatsuya was also a student at First High; it was improbable for him to know absolutely no one — and attempted to deceive or entice them, he would not remain idle.

"Mizuki."

After school, the day before the forum. Tatsuya greeted his classmate, who wore a face of confusion, while she was speaking with a young man who wore that bracelet on his right arm, and was probably a 3rd Year student . Mizuki hugged several books to her chest, which were probably club materials that needed moving. The fact that they were using materials that weren't digitized was an indication that many students in the Arts clubs probably shared the same interests he did. However, that was a conversation for another day.

"Ah, Tatsuya-kun."

Upon recognizing Tatsuya, Mizuki let out a sigh of relief. From her reaction, she had been caught in this tangle for quite some time.

First, Tatsuya carefully examined the upperclassman. He had a tall and lean build, with signs of training in martial arts.

Regarding his particular body type, Tatsuya had a certain recollection.

Without a doubt, he was the one who fled after attempting to magically ambush Tatsuya during the ruckus in recruitment week.

"I am Shiba of the Public Moral Committee. Continuing to bother other students may be construed as harassment. Be sure not to overdo it."

Tatsuya had no need to verify the details from Mizuki, and walked directly towards the upperclassman to make this known. Yet, he did not interrogate the student regarding his activities during recruitment week. There was no reason to believe that the upperclassman would answer upon being asked, and badgering him would only achieve the reverse effect. Tatsuya silently imposed himself between Mizuki and the upperclassman and directly confronted him.

The opposing side did not wear a flower over his left breast.

He wore a small pair of glasses on his face, but they did not appear to be ordinary glasses.

"I understand, then I'll back off.

Shibata-san, if you change your mind, could you please let me know? Anytime is fine."

The upperclassman retracted his hand in a very gentlemanly manner, then left by way of the stairs at the end of the hall. Tatsuya took this moment to ask Mizuki what happened before he arrived.

"He's the ace of the Kendo Club. I think his name was Tsukasa Kinoe-kun.

...He's the same as me, someone who is afflicted by 'oversensitivity to spirit particle emission', so he asked if I wanted to join a club led by someone who has the same difficulty."

Tatsuya did not expect Mizuki to voluntarily mention her own "eyes". However, he verified her oversensitivity to spirit particle emission a long time ago, so this was not surprising.

"So this was to share each other's experiences. Did I get that right?"

"No, Kinoe-senpai said that after joining the club, his symptoms have improved a lot, so maybe it could help me too..."

"That's..."

Ridiculous. Tatsuya did not finish his sentence aloud.

Even without saying so, he could tell Mizuki held the same opinion.

The only way to lessen the harm from being overly sensitive to magic-based sensations was to carefully control the Inquisitive Sensory Ability. In order to keep that ability properly in hand, the shortest path to success was definitely proper training.

For example, even for classes with no supervising teachers, the lessons learned in class were the next closest thing to "proper training". It was absurd to think that a club established by students could provide a training regime that was more effective than taking classes. Of course, it was another matter altogether if that club was directed by a member of the faculty, but the school system clearly did not have enough teachers already, as evidenced by the Course 1 and 2 system.

"Even though I've rejected him multiple times in the past on grounds of 'I'm satisfied with trying my hardest in class'."

"That's exactly right. There's no need to hurry. Taking one sure step at a time is a perfectly acceptable choice."

Mizuki nodded towards Tatsuya in manner that said "You're right", then walked towards the clubroom.

As Tatsuya walked in a different direction than Mizuki's path, his mind was racing. It was only a coincidence that he caught Mizuki when he did. But, excluding that detail, he didn't think this was a coincidence. While actively recruiting more club members in name only, or more like "baiting", their true purpose was to rope in Mizuki as one of their compatriots. Taking into account the skill level of the individual who ambushed Tatsuya before Alliance activities began, this 3rd Year student was the "real deal". At the very least, he wasn't someone that was being "baited", but instead actively "fishing" instead.

(The ace of the Kendo Club, Tsukasa Kinoe.)

Definitely need to inquire about that upperclassman, Tatsuya thought.

◊ ◊ ◊

After dinner, during a time that's usually reserved for unwinding any stress incurred over the day, Tatsuya was currently driving a newly purchased electric motorcycle.

The destination was Yakumo's temple.

He wasn't running because this was neither the early morning nor late in the night, and there were many drivers or pedestrians on the road. Use of magic without a legitimate reason was subject to penalties and fines. Even minors couldn't avoid substantial punishment.

Also, driving an electric motorcycle was not illegal any more. In 2095, traffic laws allowed anyone who was a "middle school graduate" to obtain a license for electric motorcycles. The requirements were no longer based on age, but on whether or not the individual had completed compulsory education instead.

Around his waist, a soft pair of hands gently wrapped themselves around him. On his back, his sister's twin orbs were pressed against him. Even though she was still developing, at the very least, from a perfectly objective point of view, they were undoubtedly above average for a fifteen year old (Miyuki was born in March).

That being said, Tatsuya's heart rate did not increase violently. Given that this was his sister by blood, that was only natural.

In addition, the ride lasted only ten minutes. No immoral activities, whether mental or physical, occurred along the route to Yakumo's temple.

This time, there was no violent reception from the disciples. The goal of this trip was not for further practice, so there was no need for any sort of grandiose welcome after calling ahead of time to schedule the appointment. The two of them headed directly for the cloister.

Yakumo's room was fashioned after civilian cottages seen in the early half of the 20th century. Actually, it might even be an authentic building from that time, but Tatsuya and Miyuki had no way of knowing for certain.

The fact that the temple did not shed a single ray of light around its surroundings was most likely not caused by the age of the building.

It was not just the exterior, but even the interior of the building allowed no light to pass through. It was pitch black inside the temple, with dense clouds obscuring any source of starlight against the moonless sky while the tall outer walls blocked off the street lamps.

It shouldn't be time for bed yet, unless the monks turned in earlier than usual? That was hard to imagine, considering ninjas that were early to bed and early to rise were unheard of, not to mention there was no reason for him to roll out of bed after they called ahead to schedule the appointment.

Miyuki gently reached out a hand towards Tatsuya. The hand was not shaking, and her grip on his sleeve was not very strong. However, for Miyuki, whose nocturnal vision was not nearly as refined as Tatsuya's, it should come as no surprise that she felt uneasy in the darkness — Well, since it was only a hand, she could do as she pleased. If there was any actual danger, Tatsuya would use his own magic to handle it.

The temple interior wasn't particularly narrow or spacious, so the two of them quickly reached the vestibule leading to the living quarters. There was no sign of a speaker or even a doorbell — this was definitely intentional. Just as Tatsuya was about to open the door and announce their arrival,

-- "Tatsuya-kun, this way."

From a completely silent spot not far away, a voice called out to Tatsuya.

The hand gripping Tatsuya's sleeve shook as its owner jumped in surprise while Tatsuya smiled helplessly. Seriously, even at his age, that guy still didn't tire of childish acts like sneaking around in the darkness and spooking people.

That being said, the only frightened person there was Miyuki, since Tatsuya felt practically nothing. On this level, Yakumo's "plan" was only partially successful — if there was a "plan" in the first place.

For a moment, Tatsuya toyed with the idea of turning around with Miyuki and leaving, but tonight he had business to conduct. Tatsuya swallowed his displeasure, and walked towards the source of the voice.

Yakumo stood with his waist leaning against the wall with both legs carelessly hanging out.

If he were meditating in a normal sitting position, he could easily be mistaken for any other monk, but that precisely was Yakumo's specialty. Even after being acquainted for two and a half years, Tatsuya still felt that the monk was a hard man to read.

"Good evening, Sensei, are you headed to bed?"

"Ah, good evening, Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki-kun. How can that be, because no matter how casual I am, there's no way I'd leave an appointment hanging and go off to bed."

Tatsuya's complaint was quickly written off by Yakumo. Originally expecting Yakumo to make a big deal out of this, Tatsuya was rather confounded by his response.

"Sensei, I apologize for calling at this hour.

So... since you aren't going to sleep, why are the lights out?"

"Hm? Ah, that's just a habit. If there's no need to, I keep the lights off. I am a ninja after all."

It appeared that Tatsuya was mistaken in his assumption that it was for practical jokes. No matter how many precedents there were, he had to be wary of jumping to conclusions when examining a situation, Tatsuya reflected briefly.

Of course, he wouldn't do something like that in front of Yakumo.

Yakumo detected that Tatsuya was questioning his integrity. He squinted at the siblings, then launched into his aimless rambling.

"All the same, the spiritual aura that you siblings give off is simply beautiful. Being able to view it in a place without light is even better on the eyes."

"Spiritual aura, you say?"

"In your jargon, I think you would call it Pushion light."

Towards Miyuki, who was tilting her head, Yakumo spoke with a singularly serious expression.

For him to squint his pair of incredibly narrow eyes was not just simply for show, but to properly capture something that's normally difficult to see.

"Miyuki's spiritual aura shines forth with immeasurable brilliance without wasting a single drop, while Tatsuya's aura accurately traces his silhouette. And then, connecting the two..."

"Sensei."

Tatsuya immediately cut short Yakumo's rambling. Yakumo's squinting eyes returned to normal, his face adopting a sheepish expression.

"Sorry, sorry, I forgot this is taboo."

"No, I was the one being impertinent."

Tatsuya slightly dipped his head, signifying that the conversation ended there. Naturally, there was no way Yakumo missed that.

"So, what did you need to see me for?"

"Actually, there's something I wanted sensei to look into."

Using this as an introduction, Tatsuya explained to Yakumo regarding the circumstances surrounding Tsukasa Kinoe.

"That 3rd Year student is definitely a member of Egalite, though I have reasons to believe that he is also connected to Blanche.

Unfortunately, I am uncertain what Blanche hopes to gain from using Tsukasa Kinoe."

"Egalite and Blanche, eh... Just this much wouldn't be too difficult to find."

At Tatsuya's request with a question phrased at the end of it, Yakumo frankly nodded. His words would normally be seen as overly proud or self-confident, but from his mouth they appeared almost natural.

Of course, Tatsuya knew that for Yakumo, asking him something like investigating the activities of terrorist organizations operating within the country was simply "a piece of cake".

"However, I am a monk, so I cannot step too far into the secular realm.

Also, given the depth of the analysis, wouldn't it be more expedient to ask Kazama-kun? I thought the daughter of the Fujibayashi family was with him too."

"Asking the Colonel would be a little..."

"That wouldn't go well with your aunt, huh."

After a short period of silence, Yakumo curtailed the difficulties Tatsuya voiced — to the very end, Tatsuya could not say it aloud.

"If that's the case, I guess I'm your only shot."

Tatsuya wordlessly bowed his head, not in appreciation towards the acceptance of his request, but in thanks to the other side's understanding.

Yakumo casually waved his hand to signify there was no need for that, then sat down, signaling Tatsuya and Miyuki to do the same.

Tatsuya sat next to Yakumo, while the more apprehensive Miyuki sat next to Tatsuya. Seeing this, Yakumo began,

"Tsukasa Kinoe, previously known as Kamono Kinoe."

And jumped directly into the explanation.

"His parents and grandparents showed no genetic predisposition towards magic. On the surface, a purely 'mundane' family, but they're actually a side branch of the Kamo family. Despite being a side branch, it was a very distant relation, making them no different from a mundane family. Kinoe-kun's 'eyes' most likely reflect an earlier ancestor."

Yakumo's words seemed as if he had foretold Tatsuya's request ahead of time, causing Miyuki's eyes to widen in astonishment, whereas Tatsuya remained impassive.

If he was going to be amazed every time this sort of thing happened, there was no way he could have befriended Yakumo.

But, only this comment had to be said.

"Sensei, have you ever heard of 'personal privacy'?"

"I understand the literal definition."

Clearly not caring that it was his own request that invaded another's privacy, Tatsuya directly censured Yakumo. In comparison, Yakumo was completely calm as he replied.

Both Tatsuya and Yakumo blatantly ignored Miyuki, who had raised a hand in question.

"Nonetheless, did you know ahead of time that I would request a background check on Tsukasa Kinoe?"

Yet, Tatsuya's way of changing the subject was clear evidence that he was not completely ignoring his sister.

And Yakumo, also treating the earlier situation as if it hadn't happened, did not object.

"No, why I know about him was wholly unrelated to your request."

"...Is there a reason?"

"While I am the caretaker of this temple, at the same time, no, once upon a time, I was a ninja.

Much like how fish cannot survive away from water, ninjas cannot survive without constantly staying in the information loop.

At any rate, if there is a place that needs investigating, or people that are worth checking, I've taken a look already."

Tatsuya squinted his eyes.

"Our situation as well?"

Yakumo laughed heartily.

"I've inquired into it, but wasn't able to unearth any noteworthy secrets. The intelligence manipulation surrounding the two of you is truly invincible. Or should I say, worthy of its high reputation."

The air around Tatsuya and Yakumo grew tense.

Noticing the volatile atmosphere between the two, Miyuki quickly interjected.

"Sensei, regarding the relationship between Kinoe-senpai and Blanche...?"

At Miyuki's utmost effort, both Tatsuya and Yakumo relaxed simultaneously. Neither actually intended to come to blows, content to only glare at one another. The nervousness in the air caused by their fabrication quickly disappeared.

"Kinoe-kun's mother remarried, and the spouse brought with him a child from a former marriage. This adopted brother is the current leader of Blanche's Japanese branch.

In addition, he's not just a leader in appearances only. He directs the 'inner' side's work as well."

In spite of Yakumo's calm facade, his response was not such a relaxing thing.

"Kinoe-kun probably entered First High at the behest of his adopted elder brother. Most likely it's to incite the recent activities... But, what they are actually planning to accomplish remains unknown.

At any rate, there's no doubt that they're up to no good."

"I see..."

After listening to Yakumo's words, Tatsuya thoughtfully nodded.

"I'm sorry I wasn't about to help at such a critical juncture."

"No, this can be used for reference."

This wasn't merely being polite, since he didn't anticipate getting all the answers here anyway. Besides, being able to elevate "someone who may be dangerous" into "someone who is definitely dangerous" was profitable enough in its own right. Tomorrow, he should nonchalantly notify Mari that Tsukasa Kinoe needed watching long before the forum would begin — Tatsuya mentally planned out his itinerary.

After considering this, Tatsuya suddenly realized there was one more item he needed to discuss.

"Speaking of which, sensei. What level is Tsukasa Kinoe's 'eyes' at?"

At Tatsuya's question, Yakumo rubbed his chin and fell into thought.

"Yes... He's probably at the level that can identify any released spiritual motions. He shouldn't be able to read the spiritual aura hidden within the body.

At the very least, he doesn't possess the same powerful spiritual sight that Tatsuya-kun's classmate has."

Yakumo's last sentence caused Tatsuya to furrow his brows.

"You investigated Mizuki as well?"

Hearing Tatsuya's question, Yakumo revealed the most mischievous smirk of the night.

"Aren't you interested in her too?"

Tatsuya scowled. The fact that Yakumo called him on it meant that he already let it slip, and the fact that he revealed this only showed his naivety.

The aforementioned interest was nothing sweet like romance. In a word, it meant that Tatsuya was also wary of Mizuki. Just as Yakumo pointed out, she may have the ability to read the "spiritual aura hidden within the body".

"The results speak for themselves. I don't think there's any need to be on guard."

Yakumo was more than satisfied with Tatsuya's sour expression.

He was no longer laughing. Although his bland tone and flighty attitude did not change, his expression was no longer joking.

"Even if she could see your spiritual aura, that girl would not be able to understand it.

If she were adept enough with magic to read your secrets, then she would not be so troubled over her own 'eyes'."

That was probably intended to set him at ease. Tatsuya's mood changed subtly.

Although Yakumo never intended it, Tatsuya still felt that he had a fresh understanding of the fact that he was an atypical Magician.

Chapter 10

The day of the forum quickly arrived.

Half the school was congregated in the auditorium.

"It's surprising how many students gathered today."

"I think unexpected would be a better way to describe it."

"There are a lot of idle students around campus... Looks like we should petition the school for a more rigorous curriculum."

"Stop it with the lame jokes, Ichihara..."

The order of speech was Miyuki, Tatsuya, Suzune, then Mari.

They were staring at the interior of the auditorium from the wings of the stage.

Hattori and two others stood near Mayumi.

On the opposite wing, there were four 3rd Year students under the watchful eyes of the Public Morals Committee.

There was no sign of Sayaka.

"So the core members of their mobile forces are elsewhere...?"

Mari murmured as if speaking to herself.

However, that was only "as if", and she was obviously not speaking to herself.

"I agree."

Incidentally, Tatsuya was thinking the same thing, so his reply was made with that understanding.

He made a cursory examination of the grounds.

Ratio of Course 1 to Course 2 students was about fifty-fifty. Ignoring Suzune's sarcasm for a moment, there was a surprisingly large number of students, whether Course 1 or 2, who were deeply concerned about this issue.

Among them, about ten students who were members of the Alliance could be identified.

None of them appeared to be the ones who invaded the Public Announcement Room.

"Even though we have no idea what they're planning... it's not like we can actually make a move on them."

That was obvious even without saying it aloud.

Usually, they were the ones who made the first move, while we could only react after discerning their objectives.

"Just focusing on defense might sound laid back..."

"Chief Watanabe, please don't presume that this will end in violence... It's starting."

Indignant, Mari looked like she was about to reply, but she directed her gaze towards the stage at Suzune's words.

Since it was a forum-style discussion, it was only natural that they began with the cause of the forum.

"President, I have a question regarding this season's budget allocation for club activities. According to our data, clubs that engage in magic competitions and have a higher percentage of Course 1 students receive significantly greater budgets than clubs directed towards non-magic competitions that have a higher percentage of Course 2 students. This is evidence of Course 1 students receiving blatant favoritism in extracurricular activities as well as classes! If the President truly wishes for equality amongst Course 1 and 2 students, I hope she can address this imbalance."

"The budget allocation for club activities is based on the number of registered club members as well as the group's accomplishments, which is decided in a meeting between all the club leaders. The generous allocations for clubs involved in magic competitions reflect their positive results in intramural competitions. I'm sure everyone here is also aware that clubs involved in non-magic competitions that have competed with distinction at the national level, such as legball and other clubs, have received similar allocations. The idea that clubs with more Course 1 students are favored is a simple misunderstanding."

Faced with the questions raised by the Alliance, Mayumi represented the Student Council's rebuttal, and things progressed in this manner.

That being said, the Alliance didn't make any concrete demands. The only item they insisted on was the "equal" allocation of the budget, but they made no move to propose any specific clubs in need of additional allocations.

Originally, their purpose was to incite and cajole Tatsuya into joining them.

"On every level, Course 2 students are treated worse than Course 1 students. The Student Council has tried to hide this!"

"While this criticism is frequently leveled at this office, realistically speaking, do you have any examples to support this? As I mentioned earlier, usage of facilities and the allocation of materials have been equally distributed throughout Classes A to H."

Even if one side's slogan was meant to whip the crowd into a frenzy, onstage their words were nothing more than unsubstantiated theories. When faced with Mayumi's counter charge that their argument was nothing more than empty words and unverified data, this groundless slogan quickly floundered.

The forum rapidly dissolved into a platform for Mayumi to deliver her speech.

"... I cannot deny that the idea of differential treatment that the Alliance refers to exists among our students. However, that is merely the solidification of a sense of superiority and inferiority. This is fundamentally different from the situation where the privileged, fearing the loss of their special rights, act in defense of these rights by instituting systemic segregation.

The terms Bloom and Weed are banned by the school, the Student Council, and the Public Morals Committee, but unfortunately, many students still continue using them daily.

However, the problem lies not just with Course 1 students calling themselves Blooms and derogatorily labeling Course 2 students as Weeds. The problem is also compounded when Course 2 students refer to themselves as Weeds, continuing the vicious cycle of self-depreciation and resigning themselves to the idea that this is inevitable. This lamentable culture truly exists here."

At this, several hissing sounds arose, but no one could truly repudiate those words.

With a bewitching, devilish smile, Mayumi silenced the hisses before adopting a more serious expression as she earnestly defended her position. Before her, the Alliance's resistance quickly disintegrated.

"This wall of consciousness is the true problem.

While the difference between Course 1 and 2 students is written into the school system, this only reflects the lack of educators at the national level, and thus was a temporary solution with this background in mind.

Should everyone receive a subpar education, or should half the students receive a full education?

This school adopted the latter method.

It is true that there is a difference in treatment here.

This is something that cannot be averted no matter what we do.

This is also a mandatory ruling forced onto the students if they choose to study here.

But other than this, there is no difference in the system.

This might come as a shock to some people, but Course 1 and 2 students enjoy the same curriculum.

While there is a difference in pacing, lectures and practical exercises are entirely the same."

It wasn't just Tatsuya, but even Miyuki was completely amazed by this revelation.

Tatsuya involuntarily let out an "Eh..." sound, while Miyuki silently offered her agreement.

Seeing this, Suzune's mouth twitched into a smile.

"For extracurricular activities, both the Club Management Group and the Student Council strive to equally assign the rights and access to the facilities.

It cannot be denied that there is a higher emphasis placed on clubs with greater membership. Yet, when taking into consideration that everyone should have an equal opportunity, we cannot ignore the fact that not all clubs are on equal footing. This is what we think.

This is definitely not the case where extracurricular activities relating to magic competitions receive higher priority.

Just now, the Alliance members pointed out that the magic competition clubs receive a considerable slice of the budget.

The result is exactly that, except that this allocation takes into account the successes garnered by these activities, as everyone saw on the display.

Other than the problem with teachers, the reason behind the separation of Course 1 and 2 students can be clearly explained.

I think everyone can understand any situation with a foundation firmly rooted in logic.

Although there are other reasons, as we all know, they are all caused by the wall of consciousness that arose between Course 1 and 2 students after the separation."

The hissing started again.

This time, it came in two varieties. At the hissing of the Alliance supporters, a noticeable "Alliance members, shut the hell up" aura was welling up near the place where Course 2 students were standing, a clear sign that the tide was turning.

"As this school's Student Council President, I am completely unsatisfied with this situation.

Towards this wall that at times incites our students to conflict, I wish to find a way to dispel it.

However, this does not imply that the only solution lies in changing the current system. Even if Course 2 students receive differential treatment, applying the same conditions to Course 1 students would solve nothing.

It doesn't matter if you are a Course 1 or 2 student, you are still a student of this school. For the students of this campus, the three years spent here are absolutely irreplaceable to them."

Applause greeted these words. There weren't enough people to use the term "thunderous applause" to describe the reception, but even then it wasn't as if the applause was scattered. Among the applauding students, there was no distinction between Course 1 and 2 students.

As the applause faded, tranquility returned to the auditorium. Irrespective if they were Course 1 or 2 students, whether they applauded or not, everyone breathlessly awaited Mayumi's next words as she seemed to tower above them on that podium.

The Alliance representative that took the stage with Mayumi could only look on filled with unease and envy.

"To eliminate the difference in the system, but without causing that difference to reverse in direction, I think we can all accept the above two points. This is an excellent opportunity and I would like everyone to listen to what I hope to achieve.

To tell the truth, the differential treatment between Course 1 and 2 students also lingers in the Student Council.

I am referring to the nomination of student council members other than the Student Council President.

Under the current system, aside from the President, only Course 1 students may join the Student Council.

This ruling can only be changed during the annual Student Council President election, when the Student Body Meeting takes place.

I will abolish this ruling when I formally step down as President during the meeting. This is the last service I can render as the President."

It was as if the entire audience let out a breath. The students completely forgot to hiss and were busy whispering to one another. Mayumi silently waited for the chatter to end on its own.

"... Only half of my term is over. Even if I wanted to make this an official promise, our hearts and minds cannot be gathered together with force, or it may be more appropriate to say that external force has no business altering them in the first place... Thus, the only thing I wish to do is try and improve the situation, even if only a little."

The auditorium burst into applause.

On some level, the atmosphere approached the reception that only idols could induce. Irrespective of whether they were Course 1 or 2 students, they were clearly supporting Mayumi, and not the Alliance.

What Mayumi spoke of was rising above prejudice.

The activities of the Alliance truly moved in the direction of abolishing inequality on the campus. Nonetheless, this reformation progressed in a fashion vastly different from their expectations.

Revolutionaries, in general, are not satisfied with merely achieving their goals.

They insist on obtaining their heart's desire by their own hands.

This conclusion, rather than just being unsatisfactory to the Alliance members, would be more troublesome for those that manipulated the situation from the shadows.

—Moreover, the one inciting Sayaka's group from behind the scenes never planned on stopping here.

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Abruptly, a loud blast rattled the windows of the auditorium, shaking the applauding students from their reverie.

The mobilized members of the Public Morals Committee sprang into action.

Normally, they never expected their training to actually bear fruit. On orders from their Chief, they swiftly apprehended the Alliance members that were tagged ahead of time.

The window shattered as a spindle-shaped object came hurtling in.

As soon as the grenade hit the ground, it began spewing out white smoke. Before the white smoke could fully spread out, the grenade was quickly rewound like someone hitting the rewind button on a video cassette player, and quickly disappeared back out the window.

Tatsuya let out an appreciative gaze, while Hattori jerked his head away in displeasure.

Seeing this, Mayumi started chuckling to one side.

Mari pointed one arm towards the entrance.

Several invaders wearing gas masks swarmed in, but due to their difference in level, they were quickly subdued.

The anticipated surprise attack was quelled according to plan, though no one expected them to use something as over-the-top as explosives and chemical weapons.

Thus, the situation was completely brought under control without throwing the auditorium into panic.

"I'm going to take a look at the Practical Skills Building."

"Onii-sama, I'm going with you!"

"Be careful!"

After Mari finished speaking, the siblings headed towards the area where the sound of the blast originated.

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Due to the need for constant magic supervision, magic schools usually had Magicians staffed as teachers at all times.

First High, being the authority in magic schools, boasted a teaching staff composed of first class Magicians.

The school alone had the strength to repel the military might of a small nation.

Of course, even though there was a conscious understanding that possible attackers did exist, this was still beyond their expectation.

A complete lack of danger was the real cause behind the relaxing of the guard.

The place to come under attack by the invaders was the Practical Skills Building, as could be seen from its blackened walls and cracked windows. Tatsuya could also hear further blasts, like the sound of small explosives being set off. Facing the flammable liquid that was still burning as it clung stubbornly to the walls, two teachers were engaged in firefighting activities.

"What the hell is going on?"

The prowling boy responsible for protecting the teachers shouted out as he caught sight of Tatsuya.

Miyuki's fingers began dancing in a beautiful fashion.

She single-handedly operated the CAD shaped like a portable terminal.

Instantaneously, the Psion Information Aide spread out, completed the design, and activated.

The flash was the magical light that could only be seen by "magisters" like Magicians and Magic Engineers.

The three men surrounding Leo were immediately blown away. The three of them were wearing electric technician uniforms and were obviously not students nor staff.

It was as if they had stepped on a landmine, but Leo who had been in the center of it was left unscathed.

This sort of pinpoint selectivity was one of the biggest advantages of magic.

"Terrorists have invaded the campus."

While Miyuki conversed with the teachers about the situation, Tatsuya quickly cut to the chase and stated the pertinent details to Leo.

"That's pretty damn serious, huh."

Leo consented to the situation just like that — his agreement was because he understood that this was a chance to join in the subjugation.

Right now, the most important matter was the presence of enemies who had to be eliminated.

"Leo, your Houki! ... Or rather, reinforcements have arrived I guess."

At that moment, Erika appeared on the other side, from the direction of the office. Recognizing the forms of Tatsuya and co, she stopped hurrying.

"No worries. You got here in plenty of time."

"There's plenty to worry about. Like not getting killed and dying."

"What the hell!

... No, now isn't the time for that. Gimme my CAD. Crap, don't just throw it!"

CAD is a type of precision equipment, but would retain its utility even in the midst of complex situations such as these.

There would be no problem even if dropped onto a soft surface like tennis courts. Erika threw the CAD with this in mind, so she naturally ignored Leo's objection. —Even if there was some sort of damage, it was likely that Erika would ignore that too.

"Did Tatsuya do this? Or was it Miyuki?"

Erika spoke succinctly as her merciless gaze swept over the moaning invaders who were crawling away slowly.

"It was Miyuki. I couldn't have applied it that well."

"It was me. There is no need for Onii-sama to concern himself with such small fry."

Tatsuya and Miyuki beside him spoke up at the same time.

"OK, OK, what an envious sibling relationship... Is it really alright to send those guys flying without so much as a warning?"

"There's no need to hold back if they aren't students."

Tatsuya calmly replied with a comment that subtly changed the direction of the conversation. Hearing this, Erika laughed.

"Aha, and I thought high school would be a boring place."

"Scary. So this is what a bloodthirsty woman looks like."

"Shut up."

Erika raised her right hand halfway, but self-consciously pulled back from stabbing forward with the special police baton.

"Speaking of which, what are the two of you doing at the Practical Skills Building at this hour?"

Unless they were staying after school for additional practice, students usually would not return to the Practical Skills Building after class.

This wasn't a teasing retaliation, but an innocent question instead.

"Eh? No, that, well, how do I put it?"

"Eh, uh, well, that, what was it again?"

That being said, for the two of them to falter this badly was quite the unexpected turnout.

"... What are you two doing together?"

A serious question.

However, no one knew Tatsuya quite as well as Miyuki. As soon as Miyuki saw her elder brother's serious expression that carefully masked an evil smirk, she quickly figured it out.

"The two of us alone?"

Erika's voice could not conceal her astonishment.

"That's a misunderstanding!"

It would not be an exaggeration to describe Leo's response as a roar.

"I just came for more practice in practical skills! This woman came afterwards!"

"When I came to practice, this brazen fellow was already there."

"What do you mean brazen!"

"Ah, I understand. I got it. I won't take it the wrong way."

At this point, there was no longer any profit in this matter, but Tatsuya was thoroughly satisfied with the reactions elicited from the two of them.

Tatsuya quickly curtailed that thought.

"Have you found any other trespassers?"

"The teachers are guarding the other side. No wonder they're teachers, seeing as all the trespassers have already been apprehended."

Tatsuya solemnly watched Erika as he said this. Erika pretended as if the earlier interruption hadn't occurred as she replied back in a heavy tone that was neither solemn nor joking.

Leo was able to switch gears fairly quickly as well.

"I know coming from me it's a little sketchy, but those guys were only third-rate Magicians at best. I've just never trained in 3 on 1 magics."

Leo tried to downplay what happened, but handling three opponents at the same time was no mean feat.

The competency of Tatsuya's peers had surpassed his original expectations.

"Erika, any problems near the Office Buildings?"

At Miyuki's question, Erika nodded.

"They looked like they were prepared a long time ago. By the time I got there, the teachers had already subdued the attackers. Probably because all the expensive equipment is over there."

The majority of the valuables were kept in the offices for safekeeping, so it was fairly obvious to see why it would be a tempting target.

That being said, the Practical Skills Building only contained outdated CADs.

If anything significant should be pointed out for the sake of argumentation, it would be that the heat-resistant, earthquake-proof, and shock-resistant building was only blackened slightly after taking direct hits from grenades. Even if the building was damaged, it would only result in delaying classes by about one month.

In other words, in order to completely sabotage the school and prevent the facilities from operating, the logical course of action would be to disable vital equipment that were difficult to replace on a short notice, as well as specimens and research data...

"... The labs and library!"

"So, the attack over here is a diversion? But the scale is far greater than we imagined. Unless the secret meetings to organize the protests during the forum was in itself the diversion."

Regarding Miyuki's questions, Tatsuya shook his head.

"No, I think they're all real. Someone may be using the Alliance for their own purposes."

How pitiful, Tatsuya thought but he kept that to himself. If they were accused of this without being given any chance to defend themselves, it would probably be gravely insulting to the ones who truly wanted to change the system for the better.

"Let's table this for now. So, what should we do next?"

There were 3 choices.

Their first option would be to split their forces.

Alternately, they could all head for the Science Building.

Or, head for the library.

"Their target is the library."

This newly acquired intelligence decided their strategy.

"Ono-sensei?"

She was wearing a pair of low-heeled boots with a long pair of jeans, with a gleaming sweater tucked inside her jacket.

Today's wardrobe, a getup that emphasized mobility, was quite different from the one she wore several days before.

The luster denoted that the fabric was probably a fiber strengthened with bulletproof and anti-blade qualities.

Her expression was tense and nervous, giving off an air as if she wasn't entirely herself.

"The enemy's main force has already penetrated the library.

Mibu-san is also in there."

Three gazes focused on Tatsuya.

However, Tatsuya's eyes were fixed on Haruka.

Less than a second passed before he spoke.

"I'll explain everything after this is all over, is that acceptable?"

"Rejected. Despite me saying that, since I know you're going in there anyway, may I ask you a favor instead?"

"What is it?"

Although Haruka had a hesitant expression, she wasn't stumbling over her words, nor doing anything else that wasted valuable time.

"I would like to make a request as Counselor Ono Haruka. Please give Mibu-san a chance. Since last year began, she has been burdened by the dissonance that comes from her status as a valued kendo athlete versus the value assigned to Course 2 students. Even though she's asked to see me several times... I was incapable of offering her comfort. In the end, that created the opportunity for those guys to get to her."

"Do not spoil her."

Haruka's request probably came from her sense of professional duty.

However, Tatsuya ruthlessly rejected this request.

"Come, Miyuki."

"Yes."

"Wait, Tatsuya."

Following that, toward his friends who did not have the heart to refuse her, Tatsuya offered this honest warning.

"Being overly sentimental will only bring harm to yourself."

Time was of the essence, so he couldn't elaborate.

Tatsuya delivered this ominous warning as he walked ahead, his back to his friends.

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In front of the library, small knots of people were still fighting.

Beside CADs, the aggressors also carried daggers and other projectile weaponry. While there was a small group of students mixed in, the majority were from the outside — in other words, invaders.

The 3rd Year students that anchored the defensive line didn't have CADs, but possessed an overwhelming advantage in Magic Power.

Even without CADs, they could still use magic and handheld weapons to deny the enemy. With this level of skill, no wonder they were the young birds that aimed to become Magicians. (It might be more appropriate to call them young tigers than birds.)

Seeing this, Leo was the first to charge in.

"Panzer!"

With a roar, he plunged into the melee.

There was a reason behind that roar.

"I guess it takes a rare specimen to differentiate between sounds..."

"Onii-sama, just then, did his magic design and spread occur at the same time?"

"Hm, they spread out gradually in succession. That is a technique that was popular 10 years ago."

"That guy, even his magic is old school..."

Erika snarled furtively, pretending to be ignorant of the fact that her Engravement Magic was also a type of magic prevalent in the past. Thankfully, Leo didn't catch these words while he was locked in combat.

Using a hefty, bracer-shaped CAD worn on his forearm, he blocked the incoming staff and retaliated with his own attack.

Originally, a defensive type CAD would have no need to expose any movable parts or sensors on the outside, hence the voice recognition system.

That being said...

"Considering how he uses it, it's a miracle that it's still in one piece!"

"The CAD itself must have been enhanced with Fortify Magic.

Fortify Magic stabilizes the relative coordinates of molecules within a narrow area.

No matter how powerful the force, so long as the relative coordinates are spot on and the outer shell isn't broken, there's no chance of the CAD breaking."

"Something that can hold together no matter how violent you are. That type of magic suits him perfectly."

Completely ignoring Erika and company standing off to the side as well as their comments or insults, Leo recklessly charged into battle as if he was venting all of his frustration.

His hands, wrapped in a pair of black gloves, shattered stone, rubble, and ice alike, while staves forged of metal and carbon-based resin crumpled before him.

Occasionally, contact with a concealed stun baton would emit a small shower of sparks.

Daggers that couldn't be avoided and darts fired from spring mechanisms cunningly worn in the sleeves all bounced off Leo's white and green school uniform.

"So he's hardened every inch of clothing on him. It's as if he's striding around in a full suit of armor."

This was not an exaggeration for magic that one excelled in.

Leo's Fortify Magic simultaneously executed the Activation Sequence as well as the design and invocation stages of the Magic Sequence and spread out in succession while maintaining a constant state of magic renewal.

Even with weapons, it was extremely unlikely that these invading terrorists, who were barely a step above complete amateurs in terms of skill, would have any way of penetrating that armor.

To top it all off, those fists that would normally be restricted by the limits of the human body were instead strengthened by Speed and Movement Magics, creating a truly terrifying force of sheer destruction.

He would easily be accepted as an effective fighting force, even on the front lines of the military, if it was for this type of close quarters combat where the usage of firearms was restricted.

"Leo, we're going on ahead!"

"I got it!'

Tatsuya left this location in Leo's hands.

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Silence greeted them in the library interior.

If Haruka was correct, this wasn't because the attackers had been repulsed, but because the defenders were subdued.

Aside from the regular employees, there were also security personnel posted at the library, but they had probably all been eliminated by now.

Based on this alone, the skill level of the main force must have been substantially higher.

Tatsuya temporarily hid himself in the vestibule, reached out with his searching range and scanned for life signs.

There were no indications of any life signs.

Modern magic is capable of interfering with natural phenomena and its accompanying signals, which includes the existence of the phenomena and the eidos.

All users of modern magic could access the information dimension — the information medium of the universe, the platform that linked all eidos, as defined in the Greek philosophical concept of "information" — in order to identify other eidos.

That being said, very few people could clearly identify and differentiate them.

What radically separated Tatsuya from ordinary magic users was his incredible aptitude in sensory ability, to the point that he could identify each and every eidos encompassed in the information dimension.

"There are four in the Special Browsing Room on the second floor, two at the foot of the stairs, and two at the top..."

"Nice. With Tatsuya-kun here, all ambushes become meaningless. In live combat, this is definitely an incredible advantage."

"What are they doing in the Special Browsing Room?"

"This is too quiet for their purpose to be destruction. They're probably trying to steal the classified research materials held by the magic universities. If they are in the Special Browsing Room, they can easily access the unpublished materials that are inaccessible in ordinary browsing areas."

Hearing Tatsuya's explanation to Miyuki's question, Erika's expression turned glum.

"Erika, your expression seems to say that this isn't what you were expecting."

Hearing Miyuki's question, Erika shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

"That's because~, this is a high school revolt, a veritable youth revolution. But now you're telling me that the truth of the matter is something as boring as stealing research data... Don't destroy my beautiful dream with such an unpleasant truth! That's how I feel. What do you think?"

"Don't ask me. By the way, your dream was biased in the first place."

"Didn't you just answer me?"

Ugh, Tatsuya couldn't deny that. Miyuki hurriedly interjected.

"Come on, let's hurry to the Special Browsing Room. I'll handle the ambushers."

"No, leave that mission to~ me."

Erika sang out that she would deal with the situation, then charged out of cover before anyone could reply.

Silently, she glided over to the foot of the stairs.

The retractable police baton with an embedded CAD was already fully extended.

The ambushers ended up being ambushed.

The second that the police baton struck the enemy, Erika had already passed them.

She felled two opponents instantly.

In complete contrast to Leo's brutal approach to combat, she finessed the battle.

The sound of their allies hitting the ground finally alerted the guards on top of the stairs that they were under attack.

One of them charged straight down, while the other started an Activation Sequence.

However, just as the Psions started flashing, the Activation Sequence shattered.

The Magician gaped as his magic was denied.

The stiffness in his body was very unnatural, and after a second of watching, he lost his balance and toppled down the stairs.

"Ah..."

"Don't worry."

Hearing his sister's cute voice, Tatsuya replied as he returned the pistol-shaped CAD to its holder.

Humanoids often make minute adjustments to their center of balance in order to stand upright.

Everything was within reason up to this point. Miyuki was probably caught off guard by the person rolling down the stairs.

Well, it looked like his collarbone wasn't fractured, so all he'd get out of that would be a concussion and several broken ribs. That was what he meant by "don't worry".

On the other side, the attacker was equipped with a bona fide short-sword rather than a dagger as he charged towards Erika.

This seemed familiar.

It was just like Sayaka's opponent during the kendo demonstration. A green and white ribbon was tied onto the right wrist that stretched forward to deny Erika. It appeared that the kendo club was the first to be corrupted.

"Tch. Tatsuya-kun, we have to hold back against the students, don't we?"

Her voice shook a little since she was asking in the heat of combat.

Given the differences in height and wrist strength, this could heavily influence a deadlocked situation.

"There's no need to force yourself to be merciful."

At the same time that he said this, Tatsuya stepped forward,

"Ha! I don't need your help!"

Erika stopped him.

"I can easily handle this kind of opponent when I'm serious."

She temporarily raised the pressure, then quickly slid to one side.

Having switched places with her off-balanced opponent, Erika hurriedly urged Tatsuya onwards.

"Leave this place to me!"

"Got it!"

The boy was wary of being assaulted from both sides, so he dropped to a half crouch.

However, in the eyes of Tatsuya and Miyuki, this student had already ceased to exist.

Tatsuya forcefully launched off the ground.

Miyuki lightly stepped off the floor.

Tatsuya leapt onto the walls,

While Miyuki flew into the air.

Both of them quickly landed on the second floor.

"Whew~"

Erika whistled in admiration and the Alliance student gaped in shock as Tatsuya and Miyuki charged towards the Special Browsing Room.

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Sayaka's mind was a blur as she watched what was going on in front of her.

In front of the only terminal that could access the highest level of research — restricted research — in this country, her companions — members of "Blanche" — were currently hacking into the system.

Half a year ago, they were introduced by Tsukasa, the ace of the men's kendo team. For some reason, Tsukasa did not bring Sayaka to Egalite, to which he was affiliated, but to Blanche instead.

Originally, Sayaka had no intention of bringing their activities outside of campus, nor did she have any wish to participate in any lawbreaking activity. The only reason she saw them was out of consideration for Tsukasa, who often took care of her. Tsukasa's older brother, who was the head of Blanche's Japan branch, told her many things, such as how the differences on campus caused by magical talent could not be resolved. Despite knowing this, Sayaka's foremost worry remained how Course 2 students were treated differently on campus.

In truth, Sayaka really wanted to attend the forum. Not only did she want to attend, but she also dreamt of expressing her opinions. It was only because she was familiar with the details of this mission that she allowed Tsukasa to persuade her otherwise.

What the heck was she doing? -- Sayaka thought. Taking the keys without permission, being the accomplice to a break-in... Was this really what she should be doing?

Her thoughts were headed in an uncomfortable direction. Realizing this, Sayaka quickly gathered herself back onto the mission in front of her.

However, our goal is to abolish the differential treatment brought on by magic, so why do we need the most cutting edge magical research?

Tsukasa's older brother said that publicizing the research results was the first step to abolishment.

(That being said, wouldn't it be meaningless to publicize magic theories to people who can't use magic...?)

The questions that were chasing each other around in her mind once more came to the forefront.

For people who couldn't use magic, magic theory had no point whatsoever.

On some level, magic theory was grounded in scientific theory, thus separating it from other mind-based disciplines like theology.

If people who wanted the most advanced magic research data truly did exist, wouldn't they be the ones who could use magic...?

(No, research data that can benefit people who can't use magic must exist, and it is hidden here...)

This was the reason she must follow. This reason allowed her to continue on the path she was currently on.

However, no matter how many times she repeated it in her heart, she still couldn't fully accept those words.

"... Okay, it's open."

Someone chattered softly.

He hurriedly brought out a Solid Cube used for storage.

Her companions — Sayaka detected a strong sense of "desire" imprinted on their faces, causing her to avert her eyes.

Towards the door.

So, she was the first one to notice.

"The door!"

Hearing her outburst, the other members turned to look.

Before their very eyes, the square doors broke apart and collapsed into the room.

"Impossible!"

The dismayed gasps that they let out were, based on the situation at hand, actually quite conservative.

Objects that have been fortified have eidos that are much harder to manipulate. Even dual reinforced doors that could withstand a krak missile could be destroyed by magic.

However, to accomplish that it usually required a complicated Magic Sequence that repeatedly used Mass and Vibrate Magics to dissolve the door. No one could accept that a dual reinforced armor door could be silently destroyed like this.

The men froze at this sight that so thoroughly impugned their general understanding of the world. At this moment, the recording Solid Cube shattered in their hands.

Immediately afterwards, the hacking terminal dissolved as if caught in a time warp that swiftly returned it into its component parts.

Following that, the signal from the Device also halted, rendering the Browsing Room into a dormant state.

"I suppose it's more appropriate to refer to you as industrial spies? Your plans end here."

A familiar figure casually declared this as he strode forward with pistol-shaped Specialized CAD in his right hand that flashed silver with every step.

Behind him, a slim figure gracefully followed him with a terminal-shaped CAD held in one hand.

Neither sibling allowed a trace of excitement to grace their features, causing them to forget that they were in the middle of a crime scene.

"Shiba-kun..."

Sayaka softly whispered while someone raised a right hand.

It wasn't a gesture of surrender. It was a male companion pointing a gun at her kohai.

This man wasn't a student from First High.

He wasn't a student at all.

He was someone who came along on behalf of Tsukasa's older brother their leader.

This companion who had been specifically recommended by their leader was obviously intent on committing murder.

Sayaka let out a soundless scream of terror.

She wanted to stop this, but was unable to cry out. Her hands were frozen.

She was going to become an accomplice to murder; Sayaka was so terrified that she shrugged into a ball.

However, the bullets that could easily take life were not spat out of the barrel.

His right hand tightly gripped the pistol, no, the pistol was stuck to his hand.

The man's right hand was covered in purple swelling.

"Please desist from any more foolish actions. For me to be merciful towards those that intend Onii-sama any harm, I don't think I can do that."

Her voice was deathly quiet, and equally solemn.

It was like she was a completely different person.

She gave off an aura of invincibility, as if any act to defy her would be fruitless.

Just hearing her voice caused resistance to crumble.

This time, it was Tatsuya's cruel words that drifted into the ears of a terrified Sayaka.

"This is reality. Mibu-senpai."

"Eh...?"

"A world where everyone can be treated equally is inherently impossible. If there were truly an equal world that completely discounted talent and adaptability, then everyone should receive an equally cold reception from the world.

In truth, Mibu-senpai already knows this, right?

No one is capable of treating everyone equally. That only exists in carefully crafted lies in order to mislead others."

Sayaka's originally despairing visage tightened.

In the blank eyes of her kohai standing before her, she could detect a tiny trace of --

"Mibu-senpai, you were only being used so they could steal the unpublished research data stored by the magic universities. This is the truth behind your lofty ideals."

-- Pity?

"Why? Why did it turn out like this?"

The moment she realized this, the complex emotions within Sayaka burst forth.

"Is it wrong to eliminate the differences?

Is it wrong to dream of equality?

The differences truly exist here!

This can't just be my misunderstanding.

I truly was despised.

I was exposed before their scornful stares.

And I heard all their stupid names for me.

To remove all of these, is there something wrong with that?

Aren't you the same?

They compared you against your sister's superlative talents too.

You have also gone through that degradation.

You have also been labeled an idiotic fool!"

Sayaka's screams seemed to spring forth from within.

From within the well of her soul.

Yet, none of these piteous cries reached Tatsuya. His heart did not resonate with those words. That was because to Tatsuya, "these things" were simply acceptable aspects of reality.

So Tatsuya merely understood the literal "meaning" behind her words as well as the "phenomenon" she was screaming about. Here was a young lady in despair. That was the only thing he took away.

The pity that Sayaka thought she saw in his eyes, were merely the delusions brought upon her by her extreme wretchedness.

Sayaka's screams did not reach the young man's heart — but passed into the heart of the young woman standing next to him.

"I will never despise Onii-sama."

She calmly said.

However, this voice contained enough emotion to quell Sayaka's screams — an emotion of raw fury, hidden beneath the layers of calm.

"Even if every other human being insults, slanders, despises my brother, the love and respect I bear for Onii-sama will never change."

"... You..."

Sayaka was unable to speak.

Before Miyuki's proud declaration, Sayaka was not only struck speechless, but rendered unable to think as well.

"The love and respect I bear do not come from the strength of one's magic.

In the eyes of the world, my magic is many times greater than Onii-sama's.

Even then, these things will not influence the love and respect I bear towards Onii-sama in the slightest.

Before my feelings towards Onii-sama, all of these things become trivial and meaningless.

That is because I know that this only constitutes a small part of Onii-sama."

"..."

"Anyone can insult Onii-sama?

To me, this is truly insufferable effrontery.

It is true that there are ignorant fools that vilify Onii-sama.

But at the same time, when compared with the number of such trash, there are just as many, no, many more people who acknowledge Onii-sama's transcendent talents.

Mibu-senpai, you are truly a pitiful person."

"What did you say?"

Her volume rose slightly.

But it was a lifeless voice. It was a voice devoid of both feelings and thoughts.

"Aren't there people that acknowledge you?

Is magic the only way people see you?

No, that's impossible.

I know of at least one person who doesn't do this.

Do you know who that is?"

"..."

"Onii-sama has acknowledged you.

Your swordsmanship, your beauty."

"... These are only appearances."

"Exactly, these are just appearances.

But, isn't this a part of senpai as well, senpai's charisma and sense of individuality?"

"..."

"Of course, appearances are only natural.

Including the two meetings at the cafe and the time in front of the Public Announcement Room, this is the fourth time you've spoken with Onii-sama.

You've only met him four times, how much did you expect him to understand?"

"That..."

"In the end, more so than anyone else, you were the one who saw yourself being treated differently.

More than anyone else, you were also the one who viewed yourself as an inferior student and derogatorily used the term 'Weed' towards yourself."

Her words were undeniable.

No urge to repudiate this argument emerged.

This reprimand struck Sayaka like a terrible blow, causing her mind to go blank.

Just as her mind ground to a halt,

Just as she was about to abandon the will to go on,

This soulless shell allowed the devil's soft hiss to worm in.

No, in this case, it was more like the puppeteer's light whispers.

"Mibu, use the ring!"

It came from a cowardly man cowering shamelessly behind a 16 year old girl.

This man suddenly shouted out.

Accompanying this scream, his wrist also swung downwards.

A small spark ignited, along with dense white smoke.

At the same time, there were several piercing sounds that could not be heard.

It was the background noise from the Psions.

They were attempting to stop magic from invoking by using Cast Jamming - Sorcery Disruptor.

In the smoke, three separate sets of footsteps could be heard.

Tatsuya reached out twice.

And struck twice with the palm of his hand into the smoke.

With his eyes completely closed.

There were two meaty sounds of impact, along with the sounds of two bodies hitting the floor.

"Miyuki, stop!"

When Tatsuya gave out this order.

The Magic Sequence Miyuki designed swiftly morphed into another object.

It gathered the white smoke together like a tornado.

The dust clouds were compressed to the size of ping pong balls, then fell to the ground locked inside triangular ice blocks that materialized out of thin air.

Now that vision was no longer obstructed, the room revealed three men lying on the ground.

One of them was rolling around on the ground, trying to fight back the hideous pain of frostbite.

Two others bore bruises on their faces and lay there unconscious.

"Onii-sama, it is alright to let Mibu-senpai go?"

Miyuki wondered aloud.

She had no doubts regarding whether Tatsuya had any ulterior motives.

In Miyuki's mind, there was little chance for Tatsuya to develop any relationship with women that surpassed sibling banter.

Miyuki also clearly understood that Tatsuya was not the type to bring personal feelings into the mix.

"I don't doubt your skills, but there is always the possibility of a mishap when vision is obstructed.

I don't want you to run that risk, so let Erika handle Mibu-senpai."

The fastest point of egress from here would inevitably lead directly to Erika on the first floor. Given Sayaka's current state, she was in no condition to seek alternate routes.

"I don't think Erika has any vested interest in this..."

"Perhaps, if her opponent were anyone other than Mibu-senpai."

Miyuki didn't really comprehend what it meant to fixate on your opponent.

For her, combat was something to be avoided initially, but if pressed, victory overrode all other concerns.

It didn't matter who her opponent was.

For her opponent's identity, a simple label of "enemy" was sufficient, anything else became meaningless.

That being said, from a purely intellectual perspective, she acknowledged that there were people out there who placed special meaning on who their opponents were.

"Is that so? If it's Erika, then there should be no problems."

So let's leave Sayaka to Erika, Miyuki thought as she moved forward to help her elder brother bind the thieves in a way usually reserved for terrorists.

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Sayaka was now entirely relying on her subconscious for movement.

The Antinite ring was her trump card when the time came to escape.

Having gone through the education for "Magisters", she knew the nature and limits of Cast Jamming.

No, in regards to the knowledge surrounding this ring, Sayaka knew more about it than your average Magician.

This ring did not possess the power to strike down other Magicians.

It only had the power to interfere with magic through Cast Jamming. Aside from providing a method for avoiding magic attacks, there was no other purpose.

You cannot defeat that 1st Year student.

At that time, I witnessed glorious techniques that I'd never seen before.

When their leader gave her this ring, he repeatedly cautioned her with the above warning.

This ring is used solely for running away.

The deeply imprinted scene in her brain and the echoes of those powerful words reverberated in her ears, prompting her limbs to keep moving.

There were no footsteps behind her.

No one was following her.

In her heart, she understood that her companions had been taken down.

However, her paralyzed mind would not allow her to make the conscious decision to go back and help them.

Her mind consumed by the failure of their plan and the subsequent urge to flee the campus to their temporary base, Sayaka fled through the corridors and headed straight down the stairs.

At that moment, her feet came to a dead stop.

"Senpai, it's a pleasure to meet you!"

A young woman — probably a 1st Year student, given that she called her "senpai" — was smiling before her with both hands held behind her back.

"... Who are you?"

Her wariness forced out a sound.

However, that 1st Year student's cheery expression didn't dim in the slightest.

"1st Year, Class E, Chiba Erika.

I want to confirm something just in case. You are Mibu Sayaka-senpai, who took silver in last year's National Middle School Women's Kendo Competition, correct?"

The words struck Sayaka like an invisible blow.

The darkest corners of her consciousness and the deepest depths of her heart stung as if struck with a shinai.

"... And what of it?"

Suppressing the sudden pain, Sayaka replied back.

"It's nothing, nothing at all.

I just wanted to be sure."

Erika kept her hands behind her back.

However, there were no weak points anywhere on her body.

Her slim figure was incapable of blocking the corridor entirely, but there were no detectable "gaps" for a person to pass through anywhere.

And on top of that... Were the hands hidden behind her back empty?

Is she really not holding anything?

"... Suddenly showing up here. You aren't planning to let me pass."

There was no sign of pursuit to her rear.

Be that as it may, given the man in question, concealing his presence was probably a piece of cake.

Sayaka reined in her anxious emotions and strove to speak in an even manner.

She knew that her chances of breaking through unharmed were zero from the beginning.

"Where are you going?"

"That's none of your business."

"You don't want to answer... is that right?"

"Yes."

"Negotiation breakdown."

Erika happily declared.

Although the words seemed a little farfetched, but Sayaka knew very well that she never planned on letting her go in the first place.

Sayaka quickly glanced left and right.

Unfortunately, she didn't have a weapon on hand.

While she was equipped with a CAD, she would have to yield her Cast Jamming in order to use magic.

A silvery gray rod appeared in the corner of her vision.

It was a stun baton that belonged to one of Sayaka's companions.

The baton was a little shorter than what she was accustomed to, but it would serve as a suitable replacement for her usual weapon.

Sayaka slowly lowered her center of gravity.

She concentrated all her strength into her feet.

And abruptly sprang away.

After grabbing the stun baton on the ground, Sayaka fell into a crouch to greet the other woman.

On the other hand, Erika just stood there gaping at Sayaka's antics.

"There's no need to be in such a hurry, I was going to give you time to locate a weapon..."

Sayaka flushed.

This wasn't a solo performance! In an effort to hide the awkwardness and embarrassment brought on by her actions, Sayaka glared at Erika and shouted,

"Get away from there! Otherwise you're going to get hurt!"

"Self defense established! Well, I never intended to use that excuse anyways," Erika said in a very excited tone as she brought her hands from behind her to the front.

Her right hand held a retractable police baton, while the left carried an actual short-sword.

Following that, she casually tossed the weapon in her left hand to one side.

"Shall we begin, senpai?"

Erika raised her right arm.

Sayaka also took a combat stance. Her weapon was pointed directly at her opponent, her right hand placed above her left.

On one side, Sayaka with the central two-handed style. On the other, Erika in a half curved stance with the one-handed style.

The match started in a flash.

Contact was made between the blades, but their swings emitted no sounds.

The instant she saw movement, Erika swung her baton at Sayaka's neck.

Sayaka furiously raised her arm.

She dashed backwards, reflexively adopting a defensive posture as she was barely able to take this blow. At the same time, her opponent had already looped to her rear.

To parry the next blow, Sayaka instinctively raised her baton.

The shock of the blow reverberated down the stun baton into her hand. Sayaka was more than ready to close into melee range but her opponent had already retreated out of range.

"Personal Speed Magic...?"

Sayaka softly murmured.

Erika did not reply.

"... Just like Watanabe-senpai?"

However, her next words stopped Erika cold.

Although it was only a momentary hesitation, that was sufficient to shift the momentum.

Erika, who once again advanced, was forced to stop by the piercing noise that filled the corridor.

This was Psion noise, noise that normal ears could not hear.

Seeing Erika's face contort in discomfort, Sayaka immediately charged.

She would not give her opponent an instant to catch her breath.

Face, face, forearm, abdomen, diagonal slash, uppercut, face, reverse diagonal slash...

This series of sword strikes was obviously not developed solely for kendo training, as it included several techniques from ancient kendo styles.

Her attack was as swift as fire.

Just as the proverb Fūrinkazan dictated, her attack was as fierce as flame.

At some point, the Psion noise disappeared.

The reason behind this was obvious.

In order to activate Cast Jamming, a constant influx of Psions into the Antinite was required.

If the influx of Psions stopped, the noise would stop as well.

The noise that originally filled the room gradually died away.

Because Sayaka had thrown everything she had into her blows, maintaining Cast Jamming was frankly impossible.

So long as one was capable of using magic, no matter how fierce or powerful the attack was, nothing could match the speed of magic.

While she clearly knew this, Erika didn't plan on using magic.

She probably didn't have the time to design a Magic Sequence.

Erika was a Course 2 student that didn't excel in compiling technical skills.

Even so, Erika's CAD was a specialized model that was fortified for high speed combat and possessed a form that Erika was well accustomed to.

In addition, her Engravement Magic was a type that could still channel Psions even under the effects of Cast Jamming.

If she could create enough separation, then she would be able to use magic attacks.

However, Erika didn't try to break away, nor did she press forward.

In direct opposition to the high praise of the fierce flame, Sayaka's attack could only be described as fairly clumsy.

On the other hand, Erika was using precise and fluid motions to defuse each of her opponent's attacks.

Her eyes betrayed no trace of agitation.

Her breath remained perfectly even.

The first one to start breathing raggedly was actually Sayaka, who had expended all her energy on the attack.

The momentum reversed in an instant.

The attacker and defender roles were swapped.

Erika sidestepped her opponent's final blow, then immediately retaliated against Sayaka's motionless stun baton.

The stun baton, which was by design more fragile than bokkens or staves, snapped upon impact to its base.

"..."

Sayaka stared weakly at the police baton pointed at her.

Her eyes still burned with her fighting spirit.

"Please pick it up."

Erika said without moving her weapon.

"..."

Unable to comprehend her words, Sayaka made no response.

"Pick up the short-sword on the ground and show me your true strength.

I will shatter the feminine illusion that binds you."

Sayaka ignored the police baton before her eyes and bent her knees.

She picked up the short-sword that Erika discarded, then once again fell into a stance.

Afterwards, Sayaka remembered something, fell out of her stance and put her left hand atop her right.

She removed the flashing bronze ring on her right hand.

And threw it to the floor.

"I don't need to rely on that.

I will use my own strength to break your technique."

Sayaka removed her uniform jacket.

At First High, female students wore sleeveless gowns beneath their uniform jackets.

Sayaka's arms were exposed from the shoulder down, which guaranteed her complete freedom of movement.

Sayaka turned the edge of the blade skywards.

Slashing with the back of the blade was a method that completely disregarded the structural properties of the weapon, and only served to increase the risk of the blade breaking.

Even with this disadvantage, Sayaka was unwilling to allow her hesitation towards murder to dull the speed of the blade's tip, hence she assumed this position.

"I understand."

They stood in the ready position facing one another.

"Your techniques seem to come from the same style as Watanabe-senpai."

"Do not speak of my blade in the same sentence as that woman's sword. We are on completely different levels."

Each side exchanged one sentence, heralding the start of the verbal spar.

Thereafter, silence dominated the scene.

Silence turned into anxiety, and anxiety turned to urgency.

Just as the urgency reached a crescendo, Erika's figure vanished.

The exchange was over in an instant.

The crisp sound of metallic contact rang out.

It was practically impossible for the naked eye to discern, but Sayaka truly managed to defend herself against one of Erika's magically accelerated attacks.

She managed to hold off the "longsword's" first attack.

The short-sword slid from Sayaka's nerveless hands.

Subsequently, Sayaka pressed her right arm and fell to one knee.

"My apologies, senpai.

That's probably a fracture."

"... The bone cracked.

It's fine. I don't think you were holding back."

"Yes, senpai, you can hold your head up high.

That's because you forced a woman of the Chiba Family to go all out."

"I see... So, you're a member of the Chiba family."

"That's the truth of the matter.

By the way, Watanabe Mari is a disciple of our family as well.

I was the one who oversaw her certification.

In terms of pure swordsmanship, I am the superior one."

Hearing this, Sayaka finally smiled.

It was a brief, carefree smile.

"Is that so...?

I say, although the loser has no right to ask for a boon, could you call a stretcher for me?

I feel like, my consciousness, is fading, ah..."

Sayaka crumpled to the ground.

Erika carefully scooped her up.

She softly whispered into the ears of the unconscious Sayaka.

"Don't worry, senpai.

Because your gentle kohai will take senpai away from here."

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"So, you want me to carry Mibu-senpai out of here?"

Regarding Tatsuya's natural question, Erika nodded her head as if she couldn't care less.

"It's okay, she's not that heavy."

"No, that's not the issue."

"Now you can legitimately hug a cute girl to yourself, so why don't you just happily accept already?"

"I have no interest in being happy about such a trivial matter... No, that's still not the issue."

"... You know, I just had an inkling about this. Is Tatsuya-kun uninterested in women?

Like, do you swing in that direction?"

"What do you mean by that direction?"

"Gay!"

"Don't be ridiculous!

That's why I said this isn't the issue. We can easily call for a stretcher, so why must I be the one to carry her?"

Miyuki laughed merrily at this scene.

Tatsuya was simultaneously dealing with his mounting exhaustion while trying to decipher Erika's logic at the same time. —At this point, he had already half-given up on the inside.

"It would obviously make Mibu-senpai very happy!"

At some point, Tatsuya stopped replying.

While he still felt that the proposal was illogical, he was also resigned to the fact that using logic to convince Erika was going to be an extremely challenging task.

The conversation had reached its conclusion, so to speak.

"Isn't this wonderful, Onii-sama?

Although her injury isn't dire, it is true that the earlier she can be treated the better.

I think that the most efficient method would probably be for Onii-sama to carry her.

At any rate, there's no use trying to explain it further.

Your opponent is Erika, after all."

"Wait, Miyuki, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Yeah, that's true. Oh, well."

"Wait, Tatsuya-kun, what the heck is this, hitting people when they're down?

Don't you guys think that going two on one is a little treacherous?"

"Ara, I'm obviously Erika's ally here!"

"Lies! Blatant lies!"

When faced with Erika's shouting, Miyuki merely smiled pleasantly in acceptance. With this conversation as the BGM, Tatsuya carefully picked up Sayaka.

This action wasn't an abrupt one, nor did he waver when doing so.

It was more like he had no idea where to place his strength to perform this action.

"Hm, just as expected, Tatsuya-kun is quite capable."

For some reason, Erika expressed this opinion as she nodded several times. Since responding to her words would only waste more time, Tatsuya decided to start walking.

Sayaka's unconscious face looked like she was in a deep slumber.

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After learning of the capture of the library infiltrators through the screen of his portable terminal, Tsukasa of the Men's Kendo Division knew that he had to link up with his older brother, the current head of Blanche's Japan branch, and seek further instructions. This had to be accomplished in the shortest time frame possible.

While technically his older brother, he was only a stepbrother from his father's second marriage at the end of the day. However, Tsukasa always trusted his older brother as if they were directly related by blood. There was no sense of awkwardness between the two of them after the marriage initially, so how did they get to this point? He just couldn't recall how.

Whenever he thought of this mystery, it was immediately buried beneath other thoughts. The moment Tsukasa thought of this, he shook his head, because now wasn't the time to consider it. It was too dangerous to use the wireless network for contact. He wasn't worried about being overheard; he just didn't want to use such a normal method of communication, but this was a critical situation. Any inbound message, whether wired or wireless, ran the risk of being intercepted, so thinking like this was only natural.

Tsukasa wasn't expecting any problems by leaving campus. Even though this was a critical situation, it was not war time nor was it a period of civil war. There was no way a gunfight would break out on campus. Although people unaffiliated with clubs had to undergo strenuous examination, this generally did not affect students.

Tsukasa made his decision based on this assumption, but unfortunately for him, fate had other ideas.

"If it isn't Tsukasa from the kendo club. Are you headed home?"

Just as Tsukasa was about to waltz out the main gate, someone called out to him from behind.

It wasn't a friend. He did not know that voice.

When he turned around, what stood before him was a swarthy individual of medium height who could be comfortably described as boorish. Like Tsukasa, he was a large, robust 3rd Year student. He wore the emblem of the Public Morals Committee on his wrist.

"Tatsumi... Uh, aren't club activities canceled because of the riots? That's why I decided to head home!"

Faltering due to poor acting would be troublesome. Consciously ordering his body to cooperate, Tsukasa replied back in an even tone.

"Is that so? Well, that's okay. Club activities are probably canceled all around campus."

"Ah, that's it. So--"

Goodbye. The word was on the tip of his tongue, but Tsukasa never got the chance to say it.

"Wait a second. There's something I wanted to ask you."

His heart raced.

"Ask me?"

Barely managing to contain his wavering, Tsukasa managed to fake an astonished expression.

"Yeah, I need to ask you specifically, Tsukasa."

Tatsumi's voice seemed to fan the flames of Tsukasa's agitation. Tsukasa felt as if that tone knew everything he was up to.

"My Chief has an amazing special technique."

All of a sudden, the conversation changed entirely — at least that's what it sounded like — but the same sense of wariness from the beginning did not diminish in the slightest.

"By manipulating the air currents and adding some enhancements, we can create truth serums without resorting to illegal drugs."

A scream was about to force its way out of his throat, but Tsukasa fought it down.

However, he was only wasting his time.

"You don't have to fake any ambivalence, Tsukasa. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?

We already have proof, evidence that you ordered them to do these things."

Tsukasa didn't reply.

While he was a Course 2 student weak in technical skills, thanks to his extensive training in kendo he had plenty of confidence in his own Speed Magics. Both of them looked fairly swarthy and Tatsumi was one of the few 3rd Year students capable of putting out some speed, but Tsukasa was confident he had the edge in a pure footrace.

All of this was in Tsukasa's calculations, but his plans were dashed before they came to fruition.

"Tsukasa-senpai! Please come with us for a moment!"

A somber but powerful voice rang out. To be precise, the owner of this voice was standing directly in his path.

"Sawaki... Why the hell are you two here?"

Tsukasa hoarsely shouted. When the riots broke out, both of them should have been at the library. Why the heck were two members of the active combat division stationed all the way out here? It was only natural for Tsukasa to wonder about that.

"You haven't noticed yet? Our job is solely to keep an eye on you today, with some support from long range Sensory System personnel. We would've wasted our time if you didn't cave in the end, but we finally figured out your escape route."

As Tatsumi was happily explaining behind him, Tsukasa made the conscious decision to forcibly break through here.

The breakthrough would have to occur in Sawaki's direction. In this situation, returning to campus was suicide.

That being said, even though Sawaki was a 2nd Year student, he specialized in a form of magic close combat called Magic Martial Arts. Unarmed, Tsukasa had no chance — in a straight up fight, that is.

Tsukasa removed the scarf tied around his right arm.

Inside, there was a bronze colored bracelet. The Antinite Bracelet.

He activated Cast Jamming.

Tsukasa knew that by spreading the Cast Jamming waves, he was alerting their allies to his location. However, this wasn't the time to worry about that. The most important thing was to break out of the current trap and establish a link with his older brother — this powerful thought dominated Tsukasa's actions.

Tsukasa charged towards Sawaki, who furrowed his brows. At the end of the day, Magic Martial Arts was a technique that used magic to reinforce the physical body, to enable the usage of powerful combat abilities. In a scenario where no magic was used, Sawaki should have no chance of overcoming a kendoist such as himself, even if he was unarmed, without the aid of magic. With this in mind, Tsukasa struck out at Sawaki.

Sawaki easily dodged his chop.

His flank suffered a furious blow. Sawaki's elbow dug deeply into Tsukasa's abdomen.

"Tsukasa, you moron, I don't think you understand."

As Tsukasa collapsed to the ground, Tatsumi said this in a sympathetic manner.

"Sawaki is a tough opponent even without magic. There are a lot of people who misunderstand me, though those guys are incapable of doing anything without magic, and are unable to move freely without an unnecessary thing like magic."

Moaning in pain, Tsukasa couldn't reply. Sawaki silently bound Tsukasa securely.

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In the Nurse's Room, they were listening to Sayaka's side of the story.

Her right arm needed treatment, so it was best not to upset her too much. While the school doctor forbade this, it was currently Sayaka who wanted to tell her story.

Mayumi, Mari, and Katsuto were all gathered to hear this. The mastermind Tsukasa Kinoe had been captured, and the riot had been suppressed on the surface, but the exact details behind the attack were still unknown. The off-campus invaders that had been captured had already been handed over to the police by the faculty, and thanks to the efforts of the School Council, Club Activities Group and Public Morals Committee, no students were affected.

Currently, Tsukasa was in no condition to be interrogated. Taking this into consideration, Sayaka's confession became the only source of information, so it wasn't odd for Mayumi and the others to be present.

The tale began when Sayaka was first introduced to her other companions.

Last year, shortly after Sayaka entered the school, she struck up a conversation with Tsukasa. At that time, there were a lot of sympathizers in the kendo club. It wasn't just the kendo club, but students were also forming magic training clubs with similar philosophies. It came as a huge shock to discover that the time and scale of the operations far exceeded Mayumi and co.'s expectations. The one who took it hardest was probably Mari. Mayumi, Mari, and Katsuto were all struck differently by this revelation in the beginning.

"I'm sorry, I never imagined this could happen, but..."

Erika stared intently at the blinking Mari.

However, Mari had no time to care about this gaze.

"Mibu, is what you said true?"

Hearing Mari's faltering question, Sayaka lowered her head for less than a second.

Raising her head, Sayaka nodded calmly, and replied in the same calm manner.

"Now that I think about it, I might have been too proud of being called 'kendo belle' in middle school.

Therefore, shortly after I came to school, I saw Watanabe-senpai's incredible magic swordsmanship during the club recruitment week. I petitioned for personal lessons from you, but was coldly rebuffed, and that one cut really deep...

I couldn't be your opponent probably because I was a Course 2 student. Once I thought of this, I lost all my motivation."

"Wait... Just a second.

Last year's recruitment week, when I went overboard during the kenjutsu lessons?

I remember that incident.

I didn't forget that you petitioned to be my opponent.

But, I don't recall harshly rejecting you?"

"It's common for people to have difficulty understanding the feelings of the rejected."

Erika reprimanded Mari in an ironic tone, who stood there with a solemn expression and head lowered.

"Erika, be quiet for a bit."

But she was stopped by Tatsuya.

"What? Is Tatsuya-kun on Watanabe-senpai's side as well?"

"I just want you to finish listening to her. You can chew people out or debate about this after you hear everything."

Hearing this rebuke, Erika revealed a displeased expression, but quieted down regardless.

After a short period of silence, Sayaka painfully continued.

"Senpai, you said that I couldn't be your opponent, so I shouldn't waste my time and go seek someone who could match me... To hear this from my respected senpai just after coming to school..."

"Wait... No, wait a minute.

That's a misunderstanding, Mibu."

"Eh?"

"It's true that I said that.

— I'm sorry, but my swordsmanship can't compete against yours, so it's a waste of your time. So that's why you should go search for a worthy opponent for yourself — that's all.

Wasn't that how it was?"

"Eh, that... Then, if that's the case..."

"In other words, this is why I said 'I can't be your opponent'.

It's because you are much stronger than me in swordsmanship."

Sayaka wore a slack-jawed expression as Mayumi turned to ask Mari.

"Just a moment, Mari.

You mean that you turned down Mibu's request because she was much stronger than you, did I get that right?"

"That's exactly it.

While it is true that I have the edge after you add magic into it...

The techniques that I've learned are all meant to be used in conjunction with magic. I underwent physical and weapons training in order to better grasp how to use my magic more effectively.

There's no way I could be able to stand up to Mibu in terms of pure swordsmanship."

"So... It was my misunderstanding... all along...?"

An awkward silence flooded the Nurse's Office.

"I feel like such an idiot...

I selfishly misunderstood senpai's intentions... put myself down..."

Only Sayaka's whimpers prodded the silence.

"I don't think it's a waste."

Until Tatsuya shattered it with his words.

"... Shiba-kun?"

Sayaka lifted her head and gazed directly at Tatsuya, who continued to speak in a vague tone.

"That was what Erika said after seeing senpai's techniques.

To the best of Erika's knowledge, you were vastly stronger than the 'kendo belle' that took silver in the middle school competition.

It might be sad that your new found strength came from resentment and hate.

But, it is without question that Mibu-senpai's swordsmanship improved through your own dedication and diligence.

You were not consumed by hatred, nor were you overwhelmed by despair as you spent the last year training yourself to the next level. So I don't think it was wasted."

"..."

"There are many junctures in growing stronger.

There are a myriad reasons behind hard work.

You only truly waste your time if you deny the hours, hard work, and results that came from what you've done, isn't that right?"

"Shiba-kun..."

Tears welled up her eyes as Sayaka looked upwards at Tatsuya.

However, this time, she smiled.

"Shiba-kun, I have a request."

"What is it?"

"Can you come a little closer?"

"Is this enough?"

"A little more."

"Ha."

The atmosphere changed; the once tense atmosphere became fluid.

However,

"Then, please."

It quickly,

"Just stand there and don't move."

Turned back into a nervous atmosphere.

Sayaka tightly gripped Tatsuya's clothes, and buried her face into Tatsuya's chest.

"Wah, wah..."

The sniffling quickly turned into full blown sobbing.

Pressed into Tatsuya's chest, Sayaka was bawling her eyes out.

Everyone looked at one another in dismay as Tatsuya wordlessly held her slim shoulders. Seeing this, Miyuki lowered her head.

After finally settling down, Sayaka started explaining what she knew about Blanche, the organization that backed the alliance.

"Just as you foresaw, Onii-sama."

"It was so accurate that it got boring."

"That's just how reality is, Chief.

However, the real problem comes next."

Tatsuya spoke as if he had already charted out the next course of action.

"... Tatsuya-kun, are you planning to fight them?"

"That's an incorrect way to put it. I'm not going to fight them, I am going to annihilate them."

Hearing Mayumi's trepidation, Tatsuya bluntly replied back with the most incentive method possible.

"That's dangerous! You've already gone above and beyond the call of duty for students."

The first one to object was Mari.

Even within the confines of the campus, Mari was someone who was constantly doing firefighting, so her sense of danger was particularly sharp, which was only natural given the circumstances.

"I object as well. You should leave off-campus cases to the police."

Mayumi solemnly shook her head.

However,

"Is this before or after we release the details surrounding Mibu-senpai's attempted robbery and hand her over to the family court's jurisdiction?"

At Tatsuya's words, Mayumi froze and was unable to utter another word.

"I see. So you don't want the police to intervene.

And that's why this is something you can't ignore.

In order to prevent future repetitions from occurring.

Is that right, Shiba?"

Katsuto's burning gaze caught Tatsuya's eyes.

"Your opponents are terrorists. If you let down your guard, you will die.

It doesn't matter if it's me, Mayumi or Watanabe, we will not let students from this campus run that risk."

"Of course."

Despite that, Tatsuya did not cower before that gaze, and immediately replied.

"From the beginning, I never planned to request assistance from the Public Morals Committee or the Club Activities Group."

"... You plan on going alone?"

"That was the plan."

"I'm going with you."

Hearing his sister's immediate answer, Tatsuya revealed a bitter smile.

"Me too."

"And me."

Erika and Leo both stepped forward, expressing their intent to join the battle.

"Shiba-kun, if you're doing this on my behalf, I beg you to reconsider.

Just as the President said, please leave this to the police.

I'll be alright. I will just be punished for what I've done.

Compared to that, if Shiba-kun got hurt because of me, I wouldn't be able to take it."

Sayaka hurriedly tried to stop him, but Tatsuya's expression was not very welcoming.

"This isn't for Mibu-senpai."

These cold words stopped Sayaka short, causing her to lower her head.

"As someone whose personal life has been imperiled by terrorists, I too have a stake in this.

I will exterminate any and all sources of harm directed towards Miyuki and myself. This is the highest priority for me."

Was he intentionally shouldering all the responsibility in order to lighten Sayaka's sense of guilt? — It seemed unlikely, given his current expression. Lacking Miyuki's insight on her brother's thoughts, Leo, Erika, Mayumi and Mari concluded that Tatsuya was speaking earnestly from the heart.

His piercing, chilly gaze alone was enough to convince them of that.

There was no anger, no aroused fighting spirit, just calmly stating his intent to annihilate the terrorists. Before Tatsuya's confidence — or maybe determination — even Katsuto could say nothing more.

"However, Onii-sama, how do we completely exterminate Blanche root and branch?

They should have already evacuated from the temporary base that Mibu-senpai spoke of, so I don't think there will be many clues left behind."

Only Miyuki was able to converse with her brother normally.

"That's true, Tsukasa-senpai would likely say the same thing.

Rather than saying no clues were left behind, it would be more appropriate to say that we never had any clues in the first place."

"Then, what should we do?"

Although there were no clues to be had, Miyuki continued to question her brother without a trace of dismay on her features.

"In order to understand the unknown, the only thing that needs to be done is to ask someone who is familiar with the subject."

"... Someone familiar with the subject?"

"Do you have an idea, Tatsuya?"

Tatsuya did not reply to Erika and Leo's questions. He merely opened the doors leading to the exit.

"Ono-sensei?"

Mayumi smiled in a bemused manner at the sight of Haruka in a pantsuit.

"... I can't believe I was naive enough to try and conceal my presence against Yakumo-sensei's favorite student..."

She forced a smile as she said this in an uncaring tone. Her target was obviously Tatsuya.

An apathetic Tatsuya responded in a slightly surprised voice.

"You never intended to conceal your presence in the first place.

Thanks to all the untruths you've spoken, I can't tell whether you're telling the truth anymore."

"I will take that into account."

Tatsuya made a welcoming motion to usher her inside, while Haruka slowly paced towards the bedside.

She bent down and matched gazes with Sayaka, who was sitting on the bed.

"You look like you're okay..."

"Ono-sensei..."

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to offer any assistance."

Sayaka shook her head as Ono-sensei placed a hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. After a short time, she directed her gaze to the bedside.

"Haruka-chan, do you know where Blanche is currently located?"

Who are you talking to? -- Ono-sensei decided to forgo her normal playacting.

"Haruka-chan?"

"Ah? Tatsuya, didn't you know?"

The question itself was obvious, but now that he was on the receiving end, Tatsuya was hesitant on how to field it.

"Our classmates refer to sensei as such.

Haruka-chan also says she doesn't mind."

"It's not everyone, only a portion of the boys.

Tatsuya-kun, you've been tricked."

"Ah..."

This unexpected drama quickly defused the tense atmosphere in the room.

That being said, rather than mishandling the situation and causing tensions to rise, this was probably the better alternative, Tatsuya thought to himself. At any rate, this was an explanation he could somewhat accept.

"—Then, Ono-sensei."

"You can call me Haruka-chan if you like."

He couldn't believe that he was in such a predicament because of this woman's playacting. The only thing Tatsuya could do was rein in his annoyance.

"—Ono-sensei, given the situation, you can drop the act."

"No sense of sentimentality whatsoever."

"..."

"... Cough."

The opaque gaze directed at Tatsuya was quite clumsy no matter how you sliced it, but after that coughing sound — an overly exaggerated coughing sound — Haruka changed her posture.

"Someone get a map. It's much faster this way."

Tatsuya silently pulled out an information terminal.

He opened the screen and set it to map mode.

Haruka also pulled out a terminal — much more graceful and suave than Tatsuya's motion — and set it to directional transmission.

After receiving the signal, a flashing light appeared on the map.

"... That's literally right under our noses!"

"... Are they mocking us?"

The reason behind Leo and Erika's outrage lay in the fact that the enemy's lair could be reached by foot within an hour.

The image was magnified before switching over to a more detailed layout.

The location was the hills outside of the city proper, near the abandoned factories for the chemical dye industry.

"... been confirmed that the factory was the hideout of the Eco-Terrorists, which was abandoned when they fled."

Tatsuya was reading the additional notes.

"They returned to this location without being detected by law enforcement officials."

"So they're the same group?"

Although phrased as a question, given the looks on Mari and Mayumi's faces, their inner thoughts were hardly a secret.

"Were toxic materials transported to this location during this time period?"

"Hm, according to our investigation, there are no BC (biochemical) weapons on site."

Hearing Katsuto's comment, Haruka nodded.

"We should have no problems with transportation."

"Have they detected our magic?"

"Even if they did detect us, they wouldn't change their plans anyways. They're probably dug in and waiting for us to show up."

Tatsuya referred to himself as "someone who was involved" not because all the victims were students affiliated with First High. The terrorists aimed to seize unpublished magic research and techniques. With that in mind, his own personal technique may also be targeted by the terrorists. Tatsuya inferred that Tsukasa Kinoe ambushed him in the first place to ascertain how effective his technique was.

"Full frontal assault?"

"That would probably be the tactic the enemy least expects."

Tatsuya didn't need to say anything. The moment Miyuki announced such a warlike declaration, the two of them had already devised their strategy.

Katsuto agreed on this point.

"Yes, that is an acceptable tactic. Let me get the car ready."

"Eh? Juumonji-kun is going as well?"

Mayumi's question was probably mirrored in Tatsuya's thoughts.

Katsuto definitely didn't seem like the type who would bar his subordinates from fighting, only to charge off to the front line on his own.

"This is the duty of the Juumonji family who bear the name of the Ten Master Clans.

But before that, I am still a student of First High, so there's no way I could watch this pass by without lifting a finger.

I cannot leave this in the hands of the underclassmen alone."

"... Then me too."

"Saegusa, you can't go."

"Mayumi, the situation would be problematic if the Student Council President wasn't available."

"... I understand."

It took the two of them combined to barely persuade Mayumi to reluctantly accept their proposal.

"Then, if that is the case, Mari, you can't go either. There may be remnants still lurking on campus. As the Public Morals Committee Chief, leaving your post at this critical juncture would also cause difficulties."

Now it was Mari's turn to grudgingly accept that condition.

Completely ignoring the two women who were glaring (?) at one another, Katsuto turned his gaze on Tatsuya.

"Shiba, are you leaving immediately? If we wait any longer, we may be forced to fight in the darkness."

"This won't take too long. The battle will be over by dusk."

"Is that so?"

Katsuto probably saw something in Tatsuya's adamant attitude.

Thus, he didn't say anything further. He left the Nurse's Office after mentioning that he'd get the car.

"The President and Club Activities Group Leader are both members of the Ten Master Clans, this I know... So what's Haruka-chan's background?"

"We can talk about that later. Let's move."

Leo's overly impetuous question was casually brushed aside by Tatsuya.

Immediately following Tatsuya and Miyuki, Leo and Erika left the Nurse's Office.

A large all-terrain vehicle was parked outside the school dormitories.

An additional member occupied the passenger seat in the front row.

"Yo, Shiba."

"Kirihara-senpai."

"You don't seem very surprised."

"... No, I'm actually quite surprised."

The primary source of shock came from his greeting, though it must be owed that the flower dangling from his lips helped.

"Hey bro, I'm coming too."

"Do as you wish."

Tatsuya was completely unable to comprehend the state of mind necessary for Kirihara to utter those words.

Regardless, daylight was burning.

And so, Tatsuya got into the all-terrain vehicle, with his sister and friends closely behind.

Chapter 11

In a world dyed in a madder red,

A large all-terrain vehicle reflected the rays of the setting sun as it sped through the city,

Before smashing through the main doors leading to the factory.

"Nice work, Leo."

"......Nah, that was nothing."

"Man, that was exhausting."

All of a sudden, Leo was asked to encompass the entirety of a large all-terrain vehicle speeding along above 100 kilometers per hour with high level Fortify Magic at the moment of impact, an extremely taxing task that consumed all his reserves.

"Shiba, this is your plan. Call it."

Tatsuya accepted the authority and responsibility that Katsuto offered without any hesitation.

"Leo, you remain here on guard.

Erika, support Leo and take care of anyone trying to flee."

"......Is it okay to not apprehend them?"

"There's no need for such a risky action. To ensure minimal risk, just take them out.

Kirihara-senpai and the Group Leader should loop around the left to the back entrance.

Miyuki and I will enter here."

"Understood."

"OK, let's do it. I'll take care of every single one of the stragglers."

"Tatsuya, be careful."

"Miyuki, don't force yourself."

Leo and Erika both accepted this arrangement, so they did not reveal any displeased expressions.

With blade in hand — but not drawn — Kirihara charged away, with Katsuto leisurely following behind.

Tatsuya and Miyuki both walked into the dark interior of the factory with the same ease as if they were entering a convenience store.

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They encountered the enemy much sooner than expected.

Heedless of cover, Tatsuya advanced fearlessly out into the open, where their opponents stood in neat lines in the center of the meeting ground area.

"Welcome! Nice to meet you, Shiba Tatsuya-kun!

And this hime-sama must be your sister, Miyuki-kun, right?"

"You must be the branch commander of Blanche."

Tatsuya coldly interrogated the man who had his arms spread out in an exaggerated welcoming motion.

Roughly 30 years of age. Unusually young for this line of work.

He wore rimless glasses atop his tall, lanky figure. From his outward appearance, he seemed like some sort of scholar or lawyer.

"Oh, forgive my rudeness.

Just as you said, I am the commander of Blanche's Japanese branch, Tsukasa Hajime."

There was no sense of pressure, but that may have been a biased opinion. In Tatsuya's mind, this man gave off the impression that he was an intellectual of a failed revolution.

However, based on those ridiculous actions and mesmerized tone of voice, a glimmer of emotions as dark as the deepest abyss could be detected.

"Is that so?"

Even though he had seen through his opponent's wild antics, Tatsuya didn't flinch. It didn't matter which of the seven Hells he was in; Tatsuya would've already become accustomed to it. He did not need to ascertain the relationship between this man and Tsukasa Kinoe of the Men's Kendo Club, so all he did was ask this question, then firmly nodded his head.

Although he didn't verbalize it, his attitude was enough to express his intent. Tatsuya removed the silver CAD from its holster.

"Hm, a CAD. I thought you would bring firearms at least.

That being said, you're a bold one. You came forward without any heed to nearby cover.

No matter what kind of Magician you are, you can still be killed by bullet wounds!"

"I am no Magician."

Tatsuya's reaction was completely unlike someone under the threat of a sniper, causing the Blanche commander to stare at him with widened eyes.

"Oh, so that's how it is. You're still a student.

I forgot that detail after seeing you charge in like that."

"You talk too much.

Well, for you to incite these people, there must be some angle behind it."

"For your age, you're pretty good.

Using such a penetrating attitude to view things at your age makes you too rigid. At this rate, you're going to be an old-timer very quickly."

Ridiculous movements and tone. Along with those self-delusional words.

That being said, Tatsuya had no intention of playing along with Tsukasa Hajime's nonsense.

"At any rate, I advise you to surrender.

All of you, throw down your weapons and place your hands on your heads."

"Ha ha ha ha, aren't you a Weed that doesn't excel in magic?

Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't use such a taboo term.

But, where exactly does your confidence come from?

If you think that magic is the be all and end all, then you're making a terrible mistake."

As he was laughing, the wildness surrounding Tsukasa Hajime seem to multiply as he raised his right hand.

To the left and right, some twenty odd members of Blanche raised their weapons at the same time.

Apart from pistols, they also had assault rifles and semi-automatics mixed in.

"You have to be equals to even reach the bargaining table, so I'll give you another chance.

Shiba Tatsuya-kun, join us.

I heard from my little brother that you can use Cast Jamming without resorting to Antinite. I am very interested in that ability.

In regards to this exercise, I have spent a considerable time preparing for it. A lot of time and resources went into indoctrinating those damnable students so they would do my bidding. I am greatly aggravated by the waste of all that time and effort, but if you are willing to join us, I am willing to overlook all that."

His face revealed a frivolous smirk, the wildness tucked behind a mask of righteousness. It was a face that would have inspired terror in Miyuki had Tatsuya not been there. If she wasn't with Tatsuya, Miyuki undoubtedly would have felt her hackles rise at this man.

"As expected, this was your goal.

Having Mibu-senpai approach me and ordering your little brother to ambush me was to test the depths of that Cast Jamming ability?"

"Hm, I do like smart children.

But to understand so much and still waltz into here without a care in the world reveals that you are still a child.

Nevertheless, children can still be stubborn.

Even when they know they have no chance of winning, they still refuse to obey."

"And what of it?"

"Yeah...... Then, let's do this."

His movements were more like those of a con artist than of a scholar.

He threw the fake pair of rimless glasses aside, raised his forehead, and caught Tatsuya's gaze.

"Shiba Tatsuya, become one of our companions!"

Tsukasa Hajime's eyes took on a strange glow.

Tatsuya's already few expressions disappeared, his right hand holding the CAD dropped as if every ounce of strength had been sapped away.

"Ha ha ha ha ha, and now you are one of us!"

Tsukasa Hajime abandoned any pretense of hiding the wildness about him. Even though the aura about him did not command respect or awe, it was still something worthy of a leader's mantle.

"The first thing you shall do, is to personally execute the little sister that came along with you!

To die at the hands of your beloved Onii-sama is probably your fondest wish!"

This wasn't acting any more. He had already become accustomed to giving out orders.

Truly, he had already forced many people to obey him.

His twisted smile revealed his complete confidence in his own abilities.

"......It's about time to stop with the monkey antics. Anyone who even sees you would be embarrassed on your behalf."

However, that expression was transfixed at Tatsuya's mocking words.

"Consciousness Interference Type External Systematic Magic, Evil Eye.

Even with that lofty name, the truth is that the light emitted from the eyes sends out hypnotizing waves, using the speed of light to bypass the limits of human sensory abilities, directly influencing the opponent through sight using light wave oscillation type magic.

It is merely a tangent from brainwashing techniques, a skill that could be replicated with a projector: hypnotism.

While this ability voids the need for lugging a machine about and is able to control an opponent's consciousness, at the end of the day, that's all it is.

Prior to the formation of the New Soviet Federation, this was a technique that White Russia developed after extensive research."

This wasn't magic. Tatsuya froze his opponents with his words alone.

"Mibu-senpai's memory was probably rewritten in the same way."

"Onii-sama, if that's the case......"

At his little sister's wide-eyed question, Tatsuya nodded without any expression on his face.

"The errors in Mibu-senpai's memory were too extreme for it to be entirely natural.

If this was brought about by something she had misheard, it is true that this result may occur.

However, this sort of misunderstanding should disappear and cool down in time."

"......You, despicable scoundrel."

Miyuki's proper mouth bit out this furious sentence.

Maybe the flames of fury had melted the ice within.

"......You, why......"

Tsukasa Hajime groaned, speaking as if struggling with asthma. The wild smile was gone from his face. Without it, the only thing that remained was a frail scholar used to giving out orders, but unwilling to dirty his own hands.

"What an insipid fellow."

Tatsuya did nothing to cover his biting words.

"Using the right hand to remove the glasses to draw attention from the left hand manipulating your CAD. Did you think such cheap tricks would work against me?

As long as the Activation Sequence can be seen, then I know what magic you are using and can easily defeat it.

For something as trivial as your magic, removing a small portion of the Activation Sequence is sufficient. Without the hypnotism component, Evil Eye is nothing more than a simple light show."

Tatsuya had already lost interest in the con artist whose tricks had been unraveled.

"How can this be......? To do this...... Who the hell are you......?"

"Speaking of which, 'you' refers to two people, right? Being too verbose will remove that monster mask from you as well."

At this time, Tsukasa Hajime finally realized.

The youth's features and muscles slackened only after he judged Tsukasa Hajime's magic to be completely neutralized.

From the very beginning, this young man never considered Tsukasa Hajime to be on the same level as a human being.

He didn't see Tsukasa Hajime as a human. Tsukasa Hajime's features, name, personality, even consciousness were immaterial to this young man. Tsukasa Hajime finally realized that.

For this young man, Tsukasa Hajime was nothing more than an "enemy". An "obstacle".

And now, after determining the appropriate solution, all that remained was to remove this obstacle.

"Fire, damn you all, fire!"

This was not the time to act regal or majestic.

He didn't even have time to recognize the confused looks in the eyes of his companions, no, subordinates.

Thoroughly consumed by the fear that even primitive animals dread, Tsukasa Hajime gave the order to shoot.

But—

"W-what......"

"What the hell is this?"

—Not a single bullet was fired.

Full blown panic erupted in the area.

With a clatter, the various pistols, rifles and semi-automatics collapsed into pieces.

Just as the men squeezed the triggers, their weapons were broken down to their components.

In the midst of the chaos,

Only Tsukasa Hajime possessed the composure to flee.

Not a single one of his companions followed him.

"Onii-sama, please pursue immediately.

I will handle this."

"Understood."

Tatsuya strode towards the deepest part of the factory.

The crowd parted automatically around him.

Tatsuya did not pay any attention to them, remaining focused on the fleeing Tsukasa Hajime alone.

If they let him pass, the remaining Blanche members could only sit around and wait to be arrested.

Only one of these members thought to hurtle the knife in his hand at Tatsuya.

The instant that thought crossed his mind.

"Foolish plebeian."

Normally, this voice would be both charming and cute, but now it only brought despair.

"Just punish them a little.

These people aren't worth any more of your time."

"Yes, Onii-sama."

A statue completely covered in frost tilted and fell over between the two conversing siblings.

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Only one of them dared to raise a hand towards Miyuki's Onii-sama.

That asinine man was already frozen.

However, for her, this level of retribution could be said to be sufficient, but at the same time unsatisfactory.

A sufficient reason.

An unsatisfactory result.

Before the young girl's slim figure, two rows of men stood there, unable to move at all.

Both mentally — and physically.

The floor was covered by a solid layer of white frost.

The only place that shared the same season as the outer world was a small circle that spread around where the young girl stood.

The white mist condensed into a tornado.

The frost turned the air bitterly cold.

She raised her right hand.

In this reality, she stood like the Queen of Ice about to render judgement upon the damned.

"You are all very unfortunate."

Her tone was entirely different from usual.

However, these words that were filled with majesty, judgement, and authority were in no way incompatible with her appearance.

"If you had not raised your hand against Onii-sama, I had planned to go easy on you."

The cold air slowly rose.

Gradually, the cold corroded their bodies.

The faces of the men were contorted with sheer terror and utter despair.

"I am not merciful like my Onii-sama."

The white mist rose to throat level.

"Pray. Pray that you will retain your pitiful lives."

The chilling air that utterly covered the men from head to toe abruptly turned the atmosphere solemn.

Wide Area Oscillation Speed Magic "Niflheim".

Silent screams permeated the deepening mist.

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No one lay in ambush.

So his opponent already considered whether to split his forces, Tatsuya thought.

For Tatsuya, who could readily detect any existences around him, ambushes were meaningless.

In the next room, ten remaining members of the terrorist cell were waiting for him.

With ten assault rifles.

Tatsuya clicked the trigger of his CAD from the other side of the wall.

Physical obstacles were no impediment to magic.

Tatsuya was only able to freely manipulate two magics. The first was "Decomposition", which was able to render assault rifles into psions.

Panicked sounds were heard once more.

Relying on his sensory ability, his magic was able to disassemble not just Magic Sequences, but Activation Sequences as well. It was a side effect from a wholly different magic.

Identify the design, decompose the design.

As long as it was an object, he could translate the physical object into signals, and then rewrite or erase the base design at his leisure.

If it was an Information Body, then he could directly disassemble the design.

This was one of the most difficult magics imaginable, able to directly interfere with the design information.

And it was because he was born with such an ability, that Tatsuya was unable to use other magics.

He was only able to use imitation and theoretical magic.

His Magic Calculation Area was completely dominated by those two highly difficult magics.

However, he didn't need diverse magics today.

The first peerless magic was already sufficient for him to rule the field of battle.

There were no longer any weapons in his opponents' hands.

As Tatsuya advanced into the innermost depths of the room, what greeted him was not bullets, but hollow laughter accompanied by an inaudible sound.

"How is it, Magician? This is true Cast Jamming."

That wild laughter no longer possessed the same darkness that threatened to devour one's consciousness.

Tsukasa Hajime's ridiculous laughter was merely a front.

Backed into a corner, the only thing supporting Tsukasa Hajime's will was the bronze Antinite bracelet worn around his right wrist.

The other ten men also wore similar rings on their fingers.

Antinite was a military resource limited by its production location.

These areas were certain parts of the ancient Aztec Empire, somewhere in the Mayan ruins, central Tibet, the highest peaks of Scotland, and a portion of the high plains of Iran.

In other words, only areas with ancient civilizations that dwelt in the mountains could produce Antinite.

It was just like manufactured goods that could only be produced at high elevation.

"It appears that they've prepared quite a large amount of Antinite," Tatsuya said softly.

"The employer is a breakaway faction from the remnants of White Russia. Their backer is the East Asian Union."

Faltering emotions were also passed along.

Tedium welled up from the bottom of his heart.

Calling them third rate was probably overrating them.

Then again, nothing fit the criteria any better.

"Kill him!

A Magician without any magic is nothing more than a child!"

Using his fists would be too much of a hassle, so Tatsuya raised his right arm and squeezed the trigger on his CAD.

This wasn't a gun. It could only fire bullet-like projectiles that were composed of small lasers and electrically-charged particles.

Even so, every man that was hit by the shots collapsed with blood spewing from their thighs.

There were two small points - one in the front and one in the back.

There was a tiny hole the size of a needle that severed the nerves and completely penetrated the thigh.

Tatsuya kept squeezing the trigger.

Wounds appeared on shoulders and legs as men fell left and right.

In the line of fire formed by Tatsuya's Magic Sequence, the parts that formed the human body, including skin, flesh, nerves, body fluids, bones, and cellular structures were decomposed at a molecular level, creating a piercing hole.

He was only able to rewrite a small portion of the entire Information Body.

This was one of the most challenging techniques in modern magic. In recompense for using such a precise ability, Tatsuya's Magic Calculation Area was completely focused on this technique to the exclusion of all others.

"Why?"

Exactly how many times had this man uttered this line?

It seemed excessively foolish to search one's memory for the answer.

"Why are you able to use magic while under Cast Jamming?"

Cast Jamming was a type of Non-Systematic Magic able to create psion noise that disrupted other people from casting magic. The psion noise caused by Antinite was designed to interfere with the formation of Magic Sequences.

Tatsuya simply decomposed that design and changed the oscillations of the psion noise.

Cast Jamming was an obstacle that obstructed the path of Magic Sequences. It was precisely this obstacle that Tatsuya used magic to dissolve.

But, it wasn't only that.

The man who used Evil Eye couldn't even comprehend that.

Since he was about to take care of him, there was no time for any explanations.

Just then,

The wall behind Tsukasa Hajime split open.

The oscillating steel reflected light everywhere, releasing tiny sparks of silvery light.

This was the edge of oscillation-type magic Sonic Blade.

"Eeeek~~!"

His hips giving out, Tsukasa Hajime leapt to one side in dismay.

The one who took his place was Kirihara Takeaki.

Looked like he had charged in from the rear entrance and literally cut his way here.

"Yo, were you the one who took all those guys out?"

There was no other answer.

Before Tatsuya could give his assent, Kirihara nodded several times.

"Nicely done, bro.

So, who's this guy?"

Kirihara's gaze was scornful as he jerked a thumb at the man cowering against the wall.

"That's Tsukasa Hajime, the Blanche commander."

"This guy is......?"

The change was instantaneous.

The fury flowing from every pore on Kirihara's body would be enough to give Tatsuya pause.

"You were the one!

The one who deceived Mibu!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Seeing the furious Kirihara approach, maybe the fight part of the fight or flight instinct finally kicked in as psion noise several times more potent than before flooded the area.

Originally, Kirihara's Sonic Blade should be rendered useless.

Against such a strong dose of Cast Jamming.

However,

"Because of you, Mibu is!"

"Ahhhhhh!"

The blunt edge of Kirihara's blade sheared off Tsukasa Hajime's right arm with the Antinite bracelet from the elbow down.

Katsuto appeared in the gaping hole in the wall that Kirihara came through.

He frowned slightly before starting to manipulate the CAD in his left hand.

It was a Generalized CAD shaped like a portable terminal, just like the one Miyuki carried.

After a short delay to numb all five senses...

There was the acrid smell of burning flesh, accompanied by a halt to the blood loss and the screams.

Tsukasa Hajime, foaming at the mouth and wetting himself, fainted.

Chapter 12

The cleanup of the case was handled by Katsuto.

The actions of Tatsuya and co could be construed as excessive self defense at best, or unlicensed use of magic causing injury and attempted murder at worst, but the arm of the law would not extend to them. --

The power of the Ten Master Houses ascends beyond that of judicial authorities.

Once it was known that talent in modern magic is influenced by one's genetic predisposition, as a matter of course, lengths were taken to strengthen one's blood.

That means, for countries that systematically classified magic as the form of national power, throughout all these countries in the world, there are already differences from the age when magic was still unknown.

Of course, that also applies to this country.

The result was the formation of a new group to oversee the magic realm in the country.

Those are the 10 Master Houses.

Their history is less than a century old, so the hierarchy is still fluid.

However, the fact is, in the families called the Ten Master Houses, a barrier has already appeared between them and others, one that is hard to overcome.

By repeatedly reinforcing their blood with ties between the Houses, the Ten Master Houses, along with the related 100 Families, possess a marked difference from those who are not of them.

The Ten Houses do not stand in the center of politics in any way.

They do not have any power on paper.

Rather, by using their magic as soldiers, officers, administrators, they are the forefront supporting group of the country.

In exchange, instead of visibly possessing power, they gain inviolable ascendancy on the other side of politics.

This is the path chosen by modern mages in this country.

Currently the two most influential families within the 10 Houses are the Yotsuba and the Saegusa.

Coming in at third are the Juumonji.

-- In this case involving the eldest child of the Juumonji, ordinary police would not even be considered to be involved. At the close of the incident, Haruka went on a long term business trip.

The reason behind her treatment, such as it was, stemmed not from the truth.

That person still had not yet given an answer to Leo's question.

Considering a replacement counselor had not yet been appointed; it would seem she planned to come back sometime.

As part of the cleanup, the door to the library which Tatsuya had destroyed with 'decomposition' was instead said to have been destroyed by the Blanche operatives.

Even the school did not pursue the matter further due to the carelessness of the management. —Furthermore, more than half of them did not truly believe that Tatsuya alone could have blown through the composite armor of the door. They also hid the fact that another student had stolen the key.

In any case, the presence of First High School students in that place had already been written off.

As far as the adults were concerned, Sayaka's attempted espionage was a non issue.

Sayaka had been admitted to the hospital for a while.

Although the fracture in her right arm was not something to be hospitalised over, because it was found out that the Blanche leader was a user of the systematic wave vibration magic 'Evil Eye', she was taken in to ensure that there was no remaining mind control influence.

Whilst in the hospital, Tatsuya only visited her once. Erika went multiple times, and they became pretty close.

The leader of the kendo club, Tsukasa Kinoe, was also considered innocent. This was because he had been under the influence of serious mind control.

He wasn't expelled but took a long leave of absence, the reason being a voluntary withdrawal.

From the start he had not wanted to be a mage, but simply suffered impairment to his everyday life due to his hypersensitivity to particle emissions.

Tsukasa had attended a magic high school just to learn useful magic in order to keep his magically perceptive eyes in check. After the resolving of the mind control, he went back to what he really had wanted to do - kendo.

Tatsuya's extraordinary magic abilities, with the exception of his comrades who had accompanied him to the abandoned factory, remained largely unknown.

Neither Mayumi nor Mari were aware.

His friends Mizuki, Honoka, and Shizuku likewise remained ignorant.

In truth, both Leo and Erika also didn't realise the full extent of his power.

Tatsuya didn't know what Katsuto was thinking nor why Kirihara didn't say a word, but he was grateful all the same.

That particular magic of his was, as of now, still unknown to the public.

In any case, both Mayumi and Mari vaguely seemed to suspect something.

Miyuki was depressed for a week afterwards.

On the surface she was the same perfect beauty as ever, but she was seen burying her face in both hands every now and then.

She did this to some extent at home too.

As expected, it seemed she repented her use of 'Niflheim' as having been too much.

Fortunately, due to the Blanche members being caught by chance in a cold sleeve (owing to the nature of the magic, the internals of the members had been snap frozen in the blink of an eye, avoiding membrane rupture), it seemed they had not suffered irreplaceable losses to their flesh .

During that time, Tatsuya had endlessly comforted Miyuki, until she had come out of her depressed mood such that she could smile again despite her sombre condition.

For Tatsuya, school was business as usual, with work for the Public Morals Committee and the Student Council taking up much of his time, but as the entrance period finally drew to a close, he was finally able to settle into a quiet learning environment.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was now May.

Today was the day of Sayaka's discharge.

Tatsuya, along with Miyuki, visited the hospital to celebrate. (They had taken leave from their morning classes. One of the major benefits of learning from terminals was the lack of a teacher, granting a greater degree of freedom to students.)

In that place was......

"Isn't that Kirihara-senpai?"

As Miyuki spoke needlessly, Tatsuya was already aware.

Dressed in normal everyday clothes, Sayaka stood in the entrance hall surrounded by family and nurses.

In that gaggle, standing next to Sayaka was Kirihara's face, tinged somewhat with embarrassment, and looking rather nervous.

"They seem to be getting along?"

Miyuki naturally also knew of the series of events dubbed the 'Kendo dispute incident'.

Knowing that, and seeing the friendly interaction between Sayaka and Kirihara, was certainly a strange feeling.

"It almost seems like Kirihara-senpai had come every day."

"Heh, that's correct."

Upon turning around to meet that voice which had come out of the blue, he was faced by Erika with a bored look on her face.

"Che, as I thought, it really is impossible to surprise you."

"No, I was certainly surprised. I didn't think Kirihara-senpai had such a diligent character."

"That's not the point!"

Naturally, Tatsuya also knew he was changing the subject, so he simply gave a deceptive smile at Erika's pout.

"Hmph. It's because you're always doing sly things like that all the time, you got dumped by Saya as well."

Tatsuya was not terribly concerned about being dumped or such.

This was not a boast, but the number of female students who had captured his interest was zero.

More importantly—

"Erika...... when you say 'Saya', you're referring to Mibu-senpai correct?"

Miyuki voiced the question slightly faster.

"Nn? That's right"

"......You seem to have become quite intimate."

"Leave it to me!"

'Leave what?' Was stuck in his throat, but since that seemed likely to devolve the situation further, he decided to leave it be and swallow it.

More importantly, they were here on a hospital visit.

"Mibu-senpai."

Bringing along Miyuki and Erika in the rear — whether because Erika had suddenly matured, or was uneasy, she seemed excessively anxious — Tatsuya hailed the group of people.

"Shiba-kun! You came?"

As the crowd dissolved, surprised at this unexpected development and gossiping away with sidelong glances at him, Sayaka emerged and greeted Tatsuya with a wide smile.

—Next to her, Kirihara, for a moment, wore a huffy expression, but even that was a pleasant spice to the peaceful day.

"Congratulations on your discharge."

Miyuki passed her the bouquet in both hands.

At first Tatsuya had intended to follow the custom of modern times, and simply have them sent via delivery, but Miyuki had insisted that "these are something you should deliver with your own hands!" in an unusually firm and strong tone, so pushed by that threatening attitude, he decided to bring them along.

The image of Miyuki holding that bouquet was a heart achingly beautiful sight, seemingly far removed from the bleary grey of everyday, and watching Sayaka's cheerful face as she received the flowers, Tatsuya decided it was a good thing he listened to his sister.

"You're Shiba-kun aren't you?"

Taking a step back and watching the girls talking to each other, Tatsuya was relegated to a background role, when a middle aged man called out to him.

Although he had been called by his last name, the target of his gaze meant there was no room for misunderstanding.

Judging from his honed body and sharp posture, he was well versed in the martial arts.

His features also implied a kinship with Sayaka.

"I am Mibu Yuuzou, Sayaka's father."

"It's nice to meet you, I'm Shiba Tatsuya."

"I am his sister, Shiba Miyuki. Nice to meet you."

Noticing Tatsuya exchanging greetings, Miyuki came up and bowed politely behind Tatsuya.

He seemed to gape a little at her elegant regal manner, but his expression immediately tightened after as befitting a martial artist.

It was most likely that Sayaka had taken up swordsmanship from her father.

"Miyuki, would you please go look after Erika?"

As Tatsuya looked back and spoke, Kirihara had cornered Erika in the talks.

"Yes. Oji-sama, I'll take my leave."

The person whom Miyuki had referred to as "Oji-sama", Sayaka's father, couldn't help seeming slightly upset, but...

Somehow he managed an innocuous reply.

Of course, both Tatsuya and Miyuki pretended to not have noticed.

Once again, Tatsuya turned to face Sayaka's father.

As Sayaka's father full well understood that Tatsuya had sent Miyuki away so he could have Tatsuya's undivided attention, he didn't waste time with any unnecessary preludes.

"Shiba-kun, I am in your debt. The reason my daughter was able to recover was thanks to you."

"I didn't do anything.

The ones who convinced Mibu-senpai were Chiba and my sister.

Then the ones who gave her strength while she was in hospital were Chiba and Kirihara-senpai.

As one who only coldly took her to task, I feel I should be resented, much less deserve thanks."

"If you say that, then I am the one who was unable to take her to task.

I knew my daughter was bitter at her lack of progress in magic, but I disregarded it as an unimportant matter. I was blinded by my own belief that evaluation of magic skills and true combat ability were separate things, and I did not truly realise the extent of my daughter's suffering.

Instead, I took cover behind the excuse of being busy, and didn't face my daughter even as she began associating with a shady company. I'm a failure as a father.

I heard from her everything that happened during this incident.

She said that listening to your words, she remembered what she had lost long ago.

That became the chance for her to wake from her nightmare.

My daughter is very grateful to you.

She asked me to tell you that your words were not in vain.

I'm not fully aware of what that means, but what I do know is that her feelings are genuine.

Which is why I want to tell you this.

Thank you."

"......Really, there's nothing to be thankful for."

Tatsuya shook his head slightly in embarrassment, and Sayaka's father gave a slight chuckle.

"......You're just as Kazama says."

Those words were enough to penetrate even Tatsuya's coolness.

"......You know Major Kazama?"

"I am retired now, but we had shared many days in the barracks as comrades together. We're also the same age. Even now, we are close friends."

He knew that the word 'close' didn't represent the full truth. He knew only too well.

A simple friend — even a close friend — was not someone Kazama would talk to about Tatsuya.

"Upon finding out that Sayaka held you in high regard, I thought it was divine providence. If possible, I had hoped that a man like you could continue to support Sayaka in the future......"

"......I am not a person in any position to support anyone just yet."

"......Then let's leave it at that.

That was just the hopeless ramblings of a parent, so please forget it.

And of course I have told no one about the things I heard from Kazama, my daughter included, so rest easy.

I just wanted, to you as the person who could, and did indeed save my daughter, to say this one thing.

Really, thank you so much."

Saying so, without waiting for a reply — saving Tatsuya the need for any further humble reply — Sayaka's father went back to rejoin his wife.

Shaking his head slightly, putting his considerable disquiet out of his mind, Tatsuya also rejoined his sister.

"Ah, Shiba-kun. What did you talk with my dad about?"

Immediately, sensing in him a floundering man grasping for a straw, Sayaka spoke to him.

It seemed that Miyuki alone was unable to suppress Erika.

"I learnt from him that he was a close friend of someone who had taken care of me."

"Eh, is that so?"

"Yes, it's a small world after all."

"It seems there really is a deep connection between Tatsuya-kun and Saya huh?"

Erika immediately stepped up to the plate.

It seemed that she was in top form today.

"Oi, Saya. Why did you switch to Kirihara-senpai from Tatsuya-kun?

You liked Tatsuya-kun didn't you?"

"He, hey Eri-chan?"

Watching Sayaka getting flustered, Tatsuya thought of something rather different.

(Eri-chan is it......)

These two are very compatible, Tatsuya thought, as if it were someone else's business.

"Erika, I think you're getting carried away a bit too much today."

Despite Miyuki's chiding, she paid no attention whatsoever.

It was insufficient to penetrate her peak condition.

"In terms of looks, I'm sure Tatsuya-kun comes out on top."

"......You're a pretty damn insolent woman aren't you."

"Nevermind. Kirihara-senpai, you don't even come close,"

"......You're trying to make me cry aren't you?"

"Ma~ybe.

Well then Saya, was the deciding factor his faithfulness?

Did this guy's clumsy kindness finally win you over?"

Sayaka's face was bright red from ear to ear.

She tried to look away numerous times, but every time Erika would quickly step in front of her — probably even using magic at times — until finally Sayaka looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"Erika, that's enough—"

'Already', he had meant to say.

Thinking that, just as he prepared to forcibly intervene,

"Yeah...... I guess, it's as Eri-chan said."

In a weak voice, Sayaka began to confess, and it was too late.

It seemed she had hit her stress limit, and all her mental barriers came tumbling down.

"I think, I really was in love with Tatsuya-kun......"

"Whaaa?"

At Sayaka's confession, for some reason the one who was most surprised was actually Erika.

"Because he had a peerless strength, which I had always longed for.

But even as I longed, I was scared."

At Miyuki's look of concern, Tatsuya gave a light smile.

For some reason, his sister was convinced he was a man of delicate sensibilities.

"However hard I run, I will definitely never catch up to Shiba-kun. To try and become as strong as Shiba-kun, I could run and run forever, and no matter how much I run, I'd never be able to be that strong......

This may be disrespectful for Tatsuya-kun, who has so much power, but it's what I truly think."

"......I know what you mean. There are certainly times when I think of Tatsuya-kun like that."

"Kirihara-kun...... The first time I had a proper conversation with him was when he first came to visit me, but I thought, if it's him, then even if we fight, we'd always be advancing at the same pace.

And so......"

".....Thanks[2]."

While disagreeing with her goofy turn of phrase, at heart, Tatsuya thought the same as Erika.

The Sayaka before him at that time was no longer a "seemingly cute girl", but truly a "beautiful girl".

"Hey, what about you Kirihara-senpai?

From when did you start liking Saya?"

"......You're a nosy woman. That's not something important.

It's got nothing to do with you anyway."

"That's right, Erika. It doesn't matter from when anyway."

Not stopping there, as Erika paused with a question mark over her head, Tatsuya went on to show them all over why so many people had complained he was a terrible person.

"What's important is that Kirihara-senpai is now totally head over heels in love with Mibu-senpai."

"What! You-?"

"Ehh......"

"I won't go into details due to privacy, but......

Kirihara's bravery as he faced the leader of Blanche, is something which I think definitely wouldn't lose to anyone."

"I see......

Hey, Tatsuya-kun."

"Yeah?"

"Tell me all about it later."

"Chiba, you bastard!

Shiba as well, if you tell her about it I'll definitely know!"

"I won't tell her."

"Eeh, it's fine right?"

"Damn you womaan!"

As Kirihara raged and Erika pretended to run about shouting "kyaa kyaa", Sayaka's parents, the nurses, and Sayaka herself looked on and laughed warmly.

As the two of them began chasing in earnest, and Tatsuya looked on with warm, or rather, lukewarm eyes, Miyuki softly came up to stand beside him.

"Onii-sama."

"Yes?"

He answered with his gaze fixed on Erika and the others.

"Miyuki will follow you always Onii-sama, wherever you may go.

Even if you ran away at the speed of sound.

Even if you pierced the sky, and ascended to the stars themselves."

"......However you look at it, I'm not about to do something like that."

At that moment, Tatsuya gave a truly warm smile.

"For now, I think I'll keep my feet firmly on the ground rather than aim for the heavens."

Miyuki returned with a mischievous smile.

"Shall we head back to school then?"

"Yeah. If I don't get to the afternoon training, I'll be stuck there all weekend."

Miyuki understood that it was meant as a joke. That was why she could laugh along.

Yet, even so, this time, there was something Miyuki had to confirm, that which she had to ask.

"Onii-sama...... is school not hard on you? In the first place, with your abilities, you have no real need to go to school yet......

You still come, bearing all that contempt and scorn, just for me......"

"Miyuki."

Her question was interrupted by Tatsuya's voice.

"I am not attending reluctantly. I understand fully well that everyday is something that can only be experienced at this moment.

Being able to be a normal student, with you, is very enjoyable to me."

"Onii-sama......"

"And so with that, let's go back to our normal 'everyday' from here."

With a hint of embarrassment, Tatsuya held out his hand to Miyuki.

Delightedly, Miyuki took that hand.

— At the end of the day, Erika came crying to him about missing the practice in the afternoon, and he really did end up being detained for the weekend.

Afterword

The fact that you are reading this afterword would mean that this book has already been successfully published. To actually be able to see my own work finally turning into a physical book, I am still in a daze as to whether this is reality or not.

As for the reason that I am saying this, it is because this novel is my debut work, and I actually used such a bold method to begin it with by splitting the first arc being split into 2 volumes right from the get go, and what's more those 2 volumes were to be published in two consecutive months, as I am writing this afterword, I am still unable to see the end of this light novel.

The moment I proposed to "release the 2 volumes one after the other", I knew it was an exceedingly difficult request, therefore when the scheduling was so tight that I had screamed out in complaint to the heavens, I could only say that it was well deserved.

However to Stone-sama as well as the rest who were helping out, to get involved(?) in my selfish request, I can only apologise profusely for making such an unreasonable request.

Honestly speaking, as someone who is a complete newbie in this industry, to suddenly want to do something like "to be continued in the next volume", is this kind of outrageous move really okay? I am actually feeling a lot of fear towards this.

This novel was originally published on the internet and therefore the number of pages then did not matter, I know that when adapting it into a physical light novel I had to either fasciculate it or prune out some of the content, and I am extremely thankful that I was able to get the permission to "not prune" from Editor-sama, however I still had plenty of concerns.

Since this was an irregular product, there will be many uneasy elements that may arise, and I have to recognise that is the case. However it is precisely because there exists such elements, when Editor-sama gave the goal of releasing 2 volumes in consecutive months, I did not say much and just agreed to it...

Speaking of irregular things, about the main characters in the story of "Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei", although they do have a certain degree of difference from others, however they are also an irregular bunch of teenagers.

Speaking of which, the concept of the main protagonist, Tatsuya, is "due to being unable to establish a frame work for evaluation, therefore has been branded with the label of being a poor performing student", the group of people around him also have their irregularities.

The other protagonist, the younger sister Miyuki, who is being rated differently, is also the same, although she's an honors student but she is definitely not ordinary. ...However if you, the readers have already read through the book, then in actual fact I didn't really need to emphasise on this point again.

However, for both the male and female protagonist's groups, with regards to the matter of them belonging in the irregular group, they do not feel uneasy or upset about it. For the protagonists as well as the other major characters, they are already enlightened by the mindset of "so what?". No, perhaps I should say that they even lack the idea of being enlightened.

The rebels will use tough and extreme measures, in order to let themselves be able to advance bravely.....and this probably has implications that I look forward to seeing.

There is a certain charm in rebels refusing to bow down to the traditional system and fighting desperately to the last drop of blood before finally withering away in defeat. On the other hand, I also find it very difficult to part with the topic of rebels who shout "So what?" and pierce through the high walls of orthodoxy to advance forward.

Tatsuya and Miyuki, Leo and Erika, Mayumi and Mari, as well as the many other honor students and poor performing students, using such irregular characters to create a truly exciting and wonderful story...

I thought it would be nice if I can write such a story.

I guess I will stop talking about my dreams here.

To the Ishida-sama who drew such wonderful and beautiful illustrations, and also Stone-sama who patiently handled all my requests, as well as all the others who were involved in the creation of this light novel, really thank you so much, all of you.

Especially M-sama, since I had made many unsatisfactory portions here and there, please allow me to sincerely apologise here.

And most importantly, I want to sincerely thank all the readers that picked up this book.

I hope that I will have the honor of seeing all of you again in the next volume "Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei 3 - Nine Schools Competition (I)".

(Satou Tsutomu)

References

1. ↑ Danke: a German word for thanks
2. ↑ Gochisousama: Normally meaning thanks (for a meal), in this context it means thanks for the.. ero information.

Disclaimer

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